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# IRIS

*the republican magazine*

**SPECIAL  
EDITION  
RE-ISSUED**

25 years on - The inside  
story of the 1983 H-Block Escape

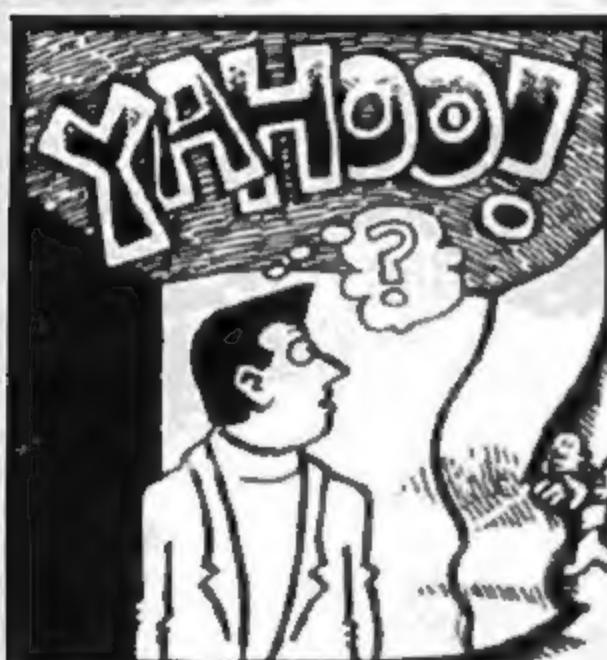


## The Greatest Escape

**EXCLUSIVE**

How the IRA planned to  
pick up the escapers





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Autumn 1993

NUMBER 18 (reissued)



• "Open up the Long Kesh gate, meals on wheels for 38" — the abandoned Long Kesh 'takeaway' food lorry

• Gateway to freedom!



• Óglaigh from South Armagh Brigade with the weaponry they were armed with in the back-up operation for the 1983 escape. The photograph, taken shortly before Volunteers forced down a Wessex helicopter in May 1985, shows one of two .50 Browning heavy machine guns which were mounted on the back of a lorry, along with an M60 machine gun and another Volunteer with a Cal assault rifle.

THIS ISSUE OF *IRIS*, first published in the Autumn of 1993, on the 10th anniversary of the 1983 escape from H-Block 7 represents the prisoners' own account of that escape. The core of the material was prepared and written by the escapees themselves.

The rest of the material was prepared under the supervision of an editorial committee in the H-Blocks.

For this 25th anniversary re-issue, the chapter *Where are they now?* has been updated. Otherwise only slight additions and corrections have been made where necessary.

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# Introduction

THE 1983 ESCAPE from the H-Blocks was a major undertaking by the IRA. It involved the allocation of time and resources by those on the outside at a period of intense pressure from the British. Inside Long Kesh, the IRA prisoners spent countless hours in preparation – the painstaking collection and collation of intelligence, the meticulous planning of each stage of the operation, the continuous briefing of people on their roles and the acquiring and safekeeping of weapons vital to success.

The escape was not the work of the 'few masterminds' beloved of the media. From the germ of the idea, through the planning, to the final realisation, the success of the escape was the result of the disciplined and coordinated efforts of many people.

In October 1981, at the end of the hunger strikes, the British Government announced the defeat of the republican prisoners in the H-Blocks. Less than two years later, 38 of those "defeated" republicans smashed their way out of the "most secure jail in Europe", inflicting on the British a major military and political defeat. Nationalists throughout Ireland rejoiced at Britain's humiliation.

It was those same nationalist people who, with no thought for their own safety, aided the escapers in the days after the escape and sheltered them in the following

25 September 1983

*"One cannot fail to admire the competence of an organisation which enables the prisoners of war to bring to fruition an escape plan which, apart from last-minute calamities, was largely successful."*

— Lord Colville

months and years. For them, no praise is high enough – to them, this magazine is dedicated.

Indil chumime ar Óglaigh Brendan Burns, Kieran Fleming, Kevin McCracken, Séamus McElwaine, Pádraig McKearney, Larry Marley agus Brendan Moley a bhí bainte leis an éalu agus a thair has sma hlianta 5 shin.



• Vol BRENDAN BURNS



• Vol KIERAN FLEMING



• Vol PÁDRAIG McKEARNEY



• Vol KEVIN McCRAKEN



• Vol SÉAMUS McELWAINE



• Vol BRENDAN MOLEY



• Vol LARRY MARLEY

# An escape committee is formed

WALKING TO his workshop in Long Kesh in early 1983, along with a group of others, a prisoner again looked speculatively at the prison concrete works. Inside the works was a tall building, its sloping roof almost twice the height of the perimeter wall. For weeks he had looked at it, convinced that he could find a way to climb up to the top. From there, it was only a short distance to the perimeter wall. But how to get over the wall? "What if I could throw a grappling hook with a rope attached?" he thought. "Or what if someone outside could throw me a rope?" In more fanciful moments, he thought of making a hang-glider and flying to freedom. Eventually, he submitted a plan to the escape committee and waited, hoping for clearance to proceed.

There were many 'what ifs' in Long Kesh in 1982-83. Republican prisoners had been in the H-Blocks since 1976, all the time fighting against criminalisation and for recognition as political prisoners. They had been brutalised on the blanket protest and had seen ten of their comrades die on hunger strike. They had fought against the jail administration and loyalist prisoners in order to gain segregation. They continued a campaign of sabotage aimed at ending forced menial work. But many of them were turning their minds to other things. After years locked in cells 24 hours a day, their walled-up energy was now directed to finding a way out of the jail. Escape was on everyone's mind.

The H-Blocks were designed to be jails

within a jail. Each was a secure unit inside high steel fences and razor wire. The eight blocks were contained within three phases, each surrounded by concrete walls and connected by large hydraulic gates. The phases were themselves surrounded by an 18-foot-high perimeter wall with, at regular intervals, lookout posts manned by armed British soldiers. The sheer number of gates and segments was intimidating. The constant boast that Long Kesh was the most secure jail in Western Europe certainly appeared true to republicans, emerging from years entombed on the blanket protest. The whole place was surrounded by an air of impregnability.

Every myth is exposed by knowledge,

however. At the end of the blanket protest in late 1981 the layout of the jail was a mystery. It was the unexplored territory left blank on the map. But within a year, exploration was to begin.

By the spring of 1982, the republican prisoners had decided on a strategy of entering into the system in order to destroy it. Their first objective was to gain segregation from the loyalist prisoners. After a summer of rising tension, the loyalists were forced into protest action and the administration conceded segregation. It was an important step in the struggle for recognition as political prisoners.

In November 1982, the republican prisoners presented themselves for work. The Northern Ireland Office, sensing a propaganda victory, was only too glad to have a jail full of prisoners whom it could describe as conforming. Its publicity emphasised that republicans were now doing prison work.

It was a vitally important development. Republicans now had access to practically every corner of the camp. From the kitchens to the concrete works, from the woodwork shops to the vegetable gardens and from landscaping to the stitching workshops, the prisoners were ferried to and fro in buses, in vans and on foot, four times a day. They gained a feeling for the size and shape of the camp. Seeing the hills



• The H-Blocks of Long Kesh was said to be one of the most secure jails in Western Europe, with each block designed to be a jail within a jail



• An aerial view of the H-Blocks of Long Kesh

and trees on the other side of the perimeter wall brought home the reality that freedom was only 50 yards away.

There was a natural curiosity about the geography of the H-Blocks and their location within the wider camp. The chance to gather intelligence on all aspects of jail life and routine allowed the prisoners to take a fresh look at the structures that held them. The myth of an escape-proof jail was being exposed – possibilities for escape seemed to be everywhere.

Ideas flooded in. Most focused on the perimeter wall, and everyone seemed to have his own way of scaling it. Not all the ideas were as crazy as flying a hang-glider from the roof of the concrete works. The more experienced prisoners guarded their ideas carefully, ever mindful of the fact that if they spoke in front of the wrong person and too many people got to learn of it, the camp leadership would block the plan on the grounds of poor security.

Some worked in small groups, relying on their own resources for obtaining information and equipment. Plans and preparations mushroomed and there was chaotic overlapping and wasted effort. It was also a security nightmare for the camp leadership.

In a couple instances men worked on

their own, testing their ideas, oblivious to the need for co-ordination. One prisoner had, through personal contacts in another part of the jail, 'borrowed' a large chipping hammer and somehow managed to smuggle it back to the block. It was his intention to test the reinforced concrete wall of his cell to see if a hole could be chipped in it. Equipped with his hammer, blankets to absorb the sound and a record player to drown out any noises, he set to work over the 12.30-2pm lock-up. The wing was deadly silent. Then it started: first Bruce Springsteen's 'Born To Run' was blasted at full volume. Annoyance at this disturbance changed to concern and then panic as over the top of the music came the rhythmic sound of hammering.

The man with the hammer didn't realise that while he was being deafened by the music, the other prisoners could hear it only when he occasionally stopped working. His hammering reverberated throughout the block and it was ten minutes before he heard his neighbours, who had been frantically banging on his wall and shouting at him to stop. Incredibly, the screws didn't react to the commotion.

There was a clear need to have a more controlled approach. The camp leadership,

which had responsibility not only for escapes but for all aspects of camp life, was being overloaded. So, early in 1983, an escape committee was set up. Its brief was to vet escape plans and to help organise any feasible ones.

Many of the plans submitted were entirely hit and miss – for some, the attempt was the thing. But the committee adopted an attitude of leaving nothing to chance. It had to be ruthless in rejecting unfeasible schemes and its members had to have a meticulous approach. They first built up a detailed picture of the camp and its routines and constantly updated it, because only then could they search for weaknesses and a means of escape.

The head of the escape committee was Larry Marley. He brought his experience of dozens of schemes from the Cages, and he knew that most escape ideas were impractical. Furthermore, getting one or two men out of jail was almost worse than useless: it would not greatly aid the struggle outside, and it helped the administration by pointing out the weaknesses in their system and allowing them to refine it.

"The key," Larry said, "is to think bigger than them. We don't want to refine their system – we want to crush it."

# Germ of an idea

THE SYSTEM which the prisoners sought to crush was like that in many bureaucratic organisations. In Long Kesh everything, from how many sachets of shampoo were allowed in a prisoner's weekly parcel to the correct response in a major emergency, was contained in Governor's Orders and prison rules - documents which ran to hundreds of pages.

From these you got a picture of a prison regime of strict order and discipline with rules covering every contingency. That was in theory. In practice, rules were often ignored or liberally interpreted by screws who were in the job for easy money and who were inclined to seek an easy time.

These rules and orders were a complex absurdity which could be implemented only by robots. Human beings, with the motivations that drove the screws, were always going to make Long Kesh a warren of security weaknesses.

If you were to pick out the person best suited to discover and exploit these weaknesses, that person would be Larry Marley. He was a naturally artful and ingenious Volunteer whose years in jail had sharpened his talent - he had escaped from Newry Courthouse in 1975, was recaptured in 1976 and had been transferred from the Cages of Long Kesh to the H-Blocks following an escape attempt in 1978.

For Larry, beating the enemy's system was the thing. Even with the restricted opportunities of the blanket protest he was never happier than when he smuggled a few ounces of contraband tobacco back from his visit. Now he was given the chance to organise a mass escape - the ultimate in beating the system.

Larry was a specialist, heading a specialist team of five men selected by the camp leadership. Many others worked under his direction without knowing the full picture - security was on a strict need-to-know basis throughout.

One of the most important decisions made by Larry was to establish a bold and expansive objective: to get the maximum number of men out of the jail (initially he encouraged everyone to think in terms of an escape

involving up to 100 men). A clear objective affected the committee's way of thinking - every small idea was expanded to its limit with the objective always in mind.

Larry was also a very cautious person, always making sure the details were just right before taking a step forward. He first set about the careful collection of every scrap of intelligence. With his understanding of how a jail functioned, he sensed instantly what information could be discarded and what was worth pursuing.

Information came in from throughout the camp. Reports on the lorry used to deliver meals to the different blocks cropped up repeatedly. Larry gathered his think-tank of four experienced men who were on the wing with him in H3. He closed the cell door, covered a small notice-board with a sheet of clear plastic and wrote at the top with a marker: FOOD LORRY. Underneath, he wrote a series of questions: Where does it deliver the food? Where is it based? Where does it get petrol? Where is it repaired? Does it leave the jail? For what purpose? Officially or unofficially?

And so would begin a brainstorming session. The think-tank didn't have all the answers, but they tried to cover all the ques-

tions, with Larry prompting flights of imagination that knew few limits.

Larry pushed his team to find the answers. In the case of the food lorry, he wanted to know everything there was to know about it. It soon emerged that the lorry was a weak link in the security of the camp. It travelled to every corner of the prison several times each day and it was known also to leave the camp on occasions.

It was discovered that the lorry was used unofficially, to transport consignments of beer and spirits to the screws' social club and even as a furniture removal van when a screw moved house. So much about the lorry was lax. Official security policy dictated that all vehicles had to be searched whenever they passed through any of the inter-phase gates. Yet the food lorry was never searched on its way round the camp.

Before long, the spotlights from the escape committee were turned towards the food lorry. One early idea was that a couple of men would attach themselves to its underside and be driven out of the camp. Larry dismissed that immediately. He wanted to know if the lorry could be used in a mass escape.

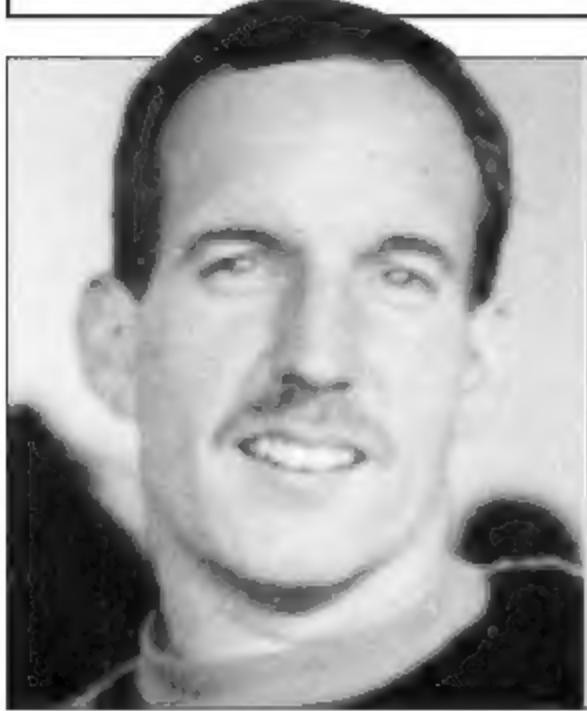
The think-tank worked their way towards new ideas. Could the lorry be commandeered



• The food lorry in which the escapers concealed themselves

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• BOBBY STOREY

and used to transport prisoners out of the camp? Where could it be commandeered? How could men get aboard it without being seen? Could the lorry get out of the camp before their absence was noticed? The discussion turned to their ability to take over certain areas of the camp. Chief among these was how to seize a wing of a H-Block without any alarms being sounded and if a wing could be taken, why not an entire block?

As it became apparent that the germ of a plan was taking shape, Larry's pulse quickened.

A H-Block is controlled, for security purposes, by its central crossbar which serves as an entrance hall and administrative area. It is known – in a throwback to Victorian jails – as the 'circle'. It contains various offices, a medical room, stores, toilets and a small canteen for use by the screws, and a control room. If a H-Block was to be seized by prisoners, they had to have control of the circle.

It seemed a very difficult objective. Larry conveyed his thoughts to the other members of the escape committee. Some were more confident than others. Weapons would be



• BIK McFARLANE

needed, all alarms would have to be guarded and every screw in the block would have to be overpowered. There would also have to be access to the front yard and gate of the block so that those areas could be held – and it would all have to be done simultaneously.

Three members of the escape committee were in H7 and they began working towards gaining access to key areas of the circle. They asked men in other blocks to do the same, without disclosing the purpose. It was clear that the prisoners needed a relaxed atmosphere in the block and a comfortable working relationship with the screws, one in which the screws didn't feel any threat from the prisoners' everyday presence in the circle.

Two factors aided this process. One was the change in climate since the end of the no-work protest. Up until then, republicans were allowed out of their cells for a very limited time each day. This enabled the screws to maintain control. They could act as screws, opening and closing doors when they wanted to and dictating what prisoners did and when.

But once republicans decided to do prison work the situation changed. They were now

on the wing in numbers all through the day and the screws found their control slipping away. Every morning, for example, the screws had to open every cell door in order to allow men out to wash and eat breakfast before they went to work. With 30 prisoners on the wing at one time, the three screws found it impossible to impose their will. They were made to feel they were rocking the boat if they tried to restrict prisoners' movement. By their decision to work, the prisoners had wrested a large measure of psychological control from the screws.

The second factor in allowing the prisoners to gain access to the circle was the administration's desire to claim that protest in Long Kesh had finally ended and that all prisoners were working. Therefore, in each block a number of prisoners were put to work as orderlies, cleaning all over the block – including in the circle.

In part it was this eagerness to defeat and humiliate republican prisoners which led to a less stringent application of security rules. As a result, the prisoners nurtured a relaxed atmosphere until it gradually became the norm.

A number of highly-sensitive areas in H7 were regularly breached, so much so that it became accepted. The security control room – the nerve centre of each block, which is in direct contact with the prison's central control room – was not, contrary to specific orders, kept locked. The bolt was merely slid home on the outside grille, while the wooden inner door was constantly open. The padlock hung loose and was only locked when senior security personnel or senior governors visited the block.

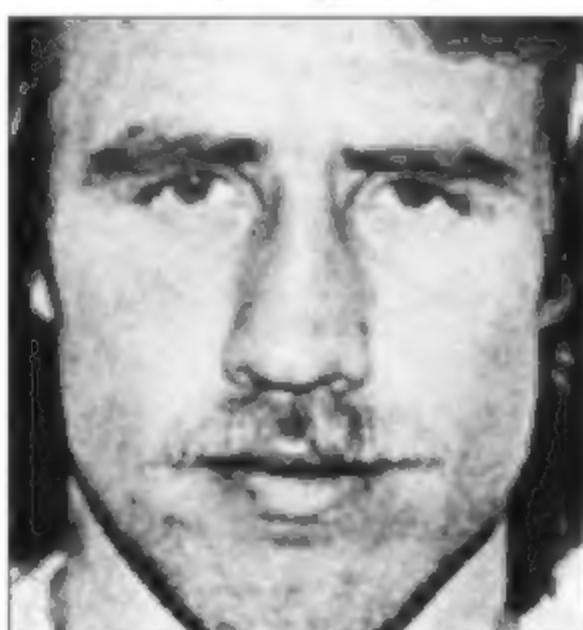
The prisoners who took up orderly duties in the circle made it a regular practice to clean out the control room and occasionally left in tea and toast for the screw who staffed it. Eventually, an orderly could open the grille himself and walk in without raising any suspicion.

Brendy Mead was instructed to befriend the SO and to be helpful to the screws. He wasn't told there was to be an escape. He was told to swallow his pride and get rid of any hang-ups about doing things for the screws, like making them tea, toast, fries – anything to make them feel relaxed and comfortable with his presence. At first he was reluctant but he was told, "Do it, you'll understand later."

He was nice to them all and he just hoped it was for a good reason. He was friendly even to the screw who had coldly told him earlier that year, "A message came for you.



• TONY McALLISTER



• BREANDAN MEAD

# THE GREATEST ESCAPE

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Your da's dead. If you want any tablets, see the MO."

Geordie Smiley, the block SO, and Brendy were getting on great. Things were so relaxed that Brendy used to sit in the governor's office with his feet on the table chatting to the governor and Smiley. His DC even commented one day, "Don't be going over the top - you don't have to lie across the table as if you're in your own house."

The screws' canteen was another area which was given some attention. One prisoner, Tony McAllister, cleaned and maintained it, made tea and became friendly with the screws who used it. It was very difficult to get a Volunteer to accept this responsibility. Most prisoners viewed it as a stigma to make tea for screws who had brutalised them for so many years during the blanket protest and hunger strikes.

Another prisoner, Bik McFarlane, was employed as the yard orderly. He was often unaccompanied when cleaning the front yard and the gate area and scant attention was paid to him by the screws.

Over a period of months, screws came to accept these security breaches as innocuous. Nothing remotely dangerous or untoward had happened and the screws felt relaxed and safe in what they saw as a very secure environment. After all, it was a jail within a jail.

Tony McAllister, Brendy Mead and Bik McFarlane, the circle orderlies, were lifers with no prospect of release until near the end of the century.

Not all the prisoners accepted that their

comrades should 'fraternise' with people they saw as bitter enemies. The blanket protest and hunger strikes had left their scars and, understandably, there was a lot of animosity towards screws who had beaten them regularly for years and who were still working in the blocks. To see some of their comrades - particularly Bik McFarlane, who had been the camp OC at the time of the hunger strike - seemingly demeaning themselves by making tea for these screws and being overly friendly with them was almost more than some men could take.

Others accused the prisoners working in the circle of carving out a cosy niche for themselves, of being concerned solely with having an easy time. There was a constant rumbling of discontent below the surface.

Nevertheless, the planning continued and Larry's escape committee became convinced that they could seize control of H7. It was chosen chiefly because of its relaxed atmosphere. Like all blocks, it had a good mixture of experienced and committed men, many of whom were lifers or long termers.

Meanwhile, Larry discovered that while the food lorry passed unchallenged through all internal gates, it underwent security checks before leaving the camp. The first of these was at the main gate tally lodge at the exit of the prison proper. This area would have to be seized and secured if the operation was to be successful. The lorry could then drive through the gate in the perimeter wall and on to the external gate in the fence surrounding the camp. Passing through this final

gate would be straightforward.

The final phase of the operation would require an armed backup force of IRA Volunteers to rendezvous with the lorry and ensure safe passage to a network of safe houses.

The escape committee was confident and enthusiastic about their plan. There were no insurmountable difficulties.

In the summer of 1983, the plan was presented to the camp leadership. It was accepted by them and a detailed operational proposal was drawn up and submitted to the IRA's Army Council.

After an eternity of weeks, the operation was cleared to proceed. The camp leadership appointed Bobby Storey as DC of the operation. His adjutant was Bik McFarlane. Both were in H7.

Their task was to turn the plan into a successful operation. Men had to be allocated to the various roles, weapons had to be procured and there had to be liaison with the IRA outside. Security had to be maintained at all times. Loose talk, if discovered, would

mean the operation being cancelled. If undiscovered, many prisoners could die in attempting to escape.

Bobby and Bik were both members of the escape committee and had been closely involved in the formulation of the plan. They were also vastly experienced and respected Volunteers with many leadership qualities. The detailed planning and execution of the escape was to test them to the full. They set to work immediately.



• The screws' canteen - it was central to the escape plan that the screws became used to seeing prisoners here

# Briefings and preparations

THE IRA, like any guerrilla army, can never hope to match the resources of its enemy. In Long Kesh alone the British had an infrastructure costing tens of millions, staffed by over 1,500 screws, guarded by a British Army quick reaction force and equipped with the latest communications and surveillance hardware. Against these resources, the IRA had its ingenuity, professionalism and secure organisational structure. It could only tip the balance by maximising these advantages and employing the element of surprise.

Bobby, Bik and Madra (another member of the escape committee who was in H7) set about breaking down the plan into individual roles. Teams were required to overpower screws in each wing, two men to take the two screws in the connecting area between the wings and the circle, and a team to take the circle. They also had to select a rearguard force to stay behind and hold the block until the lorry was clear of the camp. Madra was chosen to be the OC of the rearguard, with Madra Rua as his adjutant (neither of these men can be named because they have never faced charges as a result of their involvement in the escape). Finally, a team was to take the tally lodge and main gate once the lorry reached there. Each man would have to be briefed and given clear objectives.

Generally, the IRA position is that only those who will return to active service with the IRA will be taken on an escape. The difficulties involved in organising an escape and the problem of keeping escapers safe on the run normally preclude allowing all prisoners, no matter what their future intentions, on escapes. This escape was different. The capacity of the lorry was enough to take all those who wanted to go from H7. The Army Council said that no republican should be in jail and, given the unique circumstances of this escape, anyone who wanted to go was

cleared to do so and the IRA would look after them outside.

One guideline agreed between the camp leadership and the Army Council was that prisoners with less than four years to serve would be advised not to escape. Nevertheless, a couple of men with less than four years left still wanted to go on the escape and were allowed to do so.

It was recognised that an essential requirement to ensure the success of the operation was instilling confidence in all the men. It was a daring plan which, unlike almost all IRA operations had, once embarked upon, to be forced through to its conclusion regardless of deaths or other setbacks. Difficulties would have to be tackled head on. Everyone taking part had to be fully confident that a mass escape could work and that screws could be physically and psychologically dominated in any confrontation.

A decision was taken that the escape and rearguard leadership must always show an unwavering conviction that the operation would succeed. It would have been damaging to display the slightest doubt.

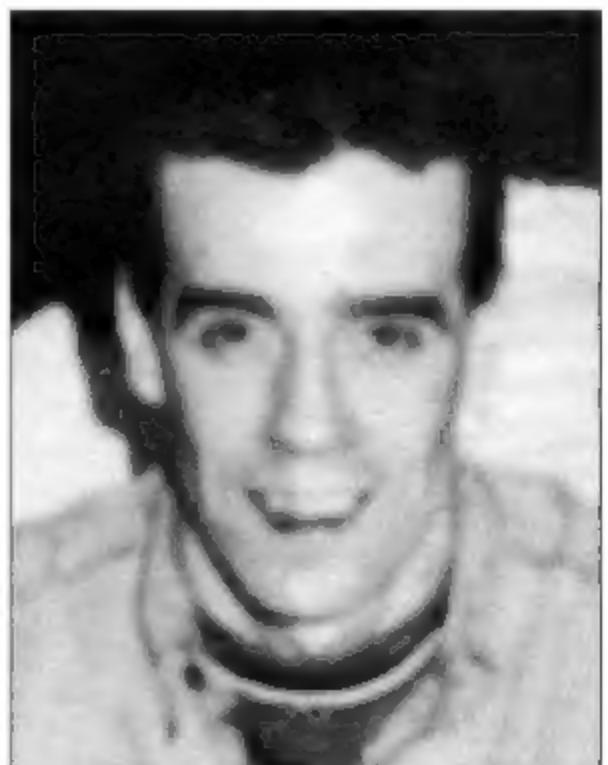
Selecting men for the various roles wasn't a problem. There were more than enough experienced and committed men in H7. Those carrying out the roles had to have a commitment to the escape so that they had the determination to push it through to its conclusion. They also had to have the discipline to carry out their brief as outlined to them and to carry out an order without question, in what was to be a fast-moving operation where timing was going to be crucial.

The first men to be briefed were those with complicated roles which they would need time to learn and psyche themselves up for. Some men therefore knew weeks in advance of the escape, others knew only hours before.

As the briefings began, a complication arose when Bik was struck down with a virus. He was confined to bed for a few days and then had to be moved to the prison hospital. Before he left, Bobby went into the cell. "Do



• SEÁN McGLINCHEY

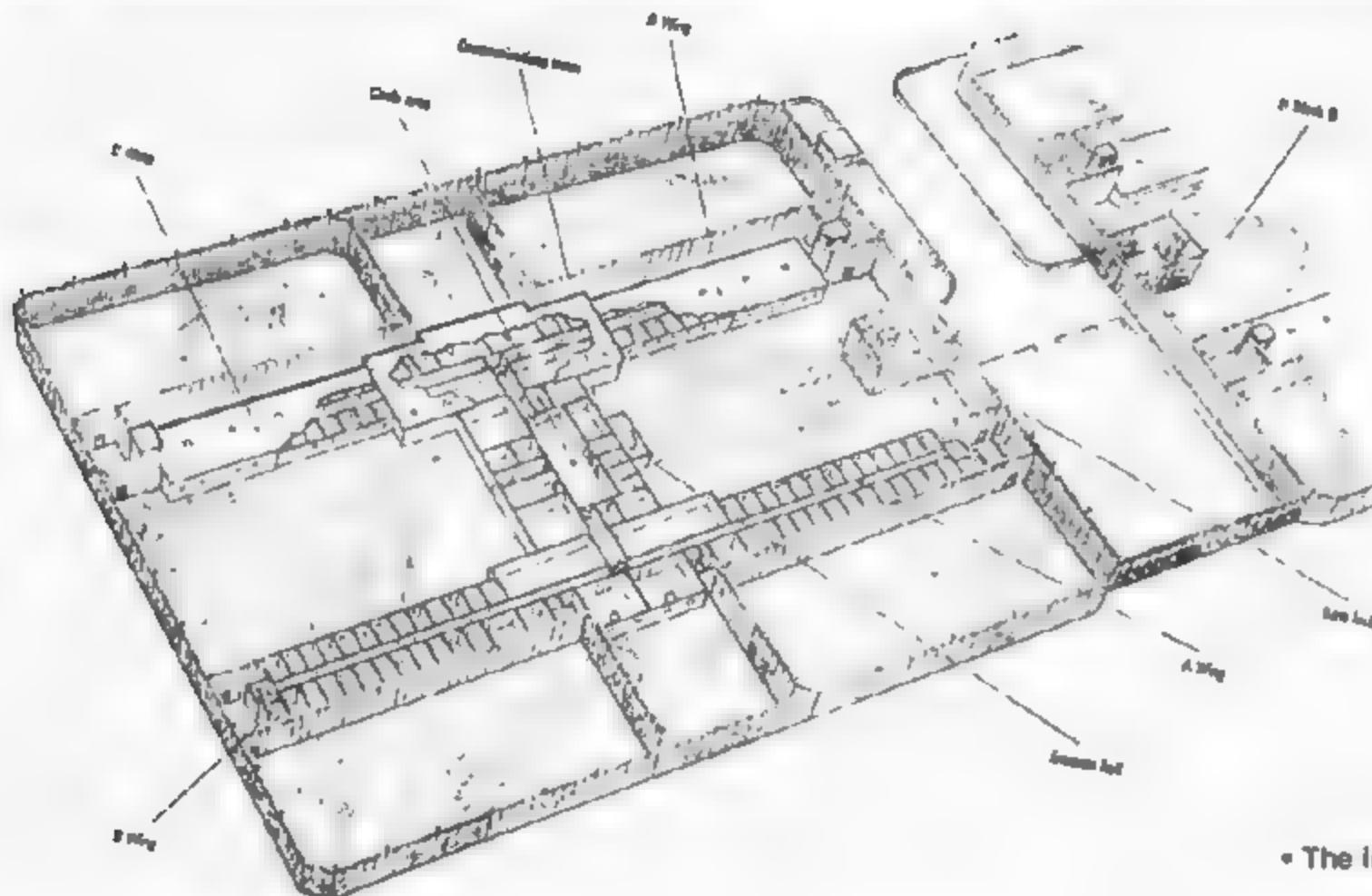


• EDDIE O'CONNOR

you think you'll be brought to an outside hospital?" he asked worriedly. "It's quite possible," Bik said, touched by the show of concern. "Well," said Bobby, "I don't care if you're on the ground floor and the window falls out, I want you back here."

Eddie O'Connor's experience of the briefings was typical. He was a lifer from County Armagh and, like everyone, the prospect of escape sometimes entered his mind. But it seemed like an unattainable goal; it was just jail talk for rainy days. Like almost everyone else, when he thought of an escape he thought of a handful of men breaking out of their cells at night and making their way stealthily to scale the perimeter wall.

But the jail talk had a serious aspect. It was a means to find out who was interested in escape (at first without revealing that escape had been planned). Eddie was interested. When he was told about the escape one night in August by his cell mate, Seán McGlinchey, he was sceptical. It couldn't possibly suc-



### • The Inside of H7

ceed. Seán then set about the process of demystifying the jail and the screws. He explained the layout of the jail and the weaknesses that the IRA had identified. The task of demystifying the screws was no problem – everyone knew from their own experience that there was nothing approaching invulnerability about the screws in Long Kesh.

Sean gave Eddie the plan which contained the details of how the escape was to work and the different roles to be performed. Eddie read it with growing excitement. He changed overnight from a sceptic to someone convinced it could succeed. The plan had logic and every angle seemed to be covered. Besides that, he had confidence in the men leading it.

Seán talked him through his role in taking over the wing. Did he think he could overpower a screw and prevent him from hitting an alarm? Eddie thought about it. "No problem," he said. Seán encouraged him to think carefully about every aspect of his role.

Eddie was also briefed to carry out a role in the tally lodge. Dressed in a screw's uniform, he would have to arrest screws going off duty. He was given maps and briefing papers covering his role and where it fitted into the overall assault on the tally lodge. He was told to study them.

A few days later Eddie went to a cell with Bobby and Bill. For two hours he was quizzed on his brief. What do you do after you get out of the lorry? Who will be with you? On your left will be who? On your

right? What do you do with the screws you arrest? He was asked if he had any criticisms or questions.

Ten days later, he had another two hours with Bobby and Bik. Every detail was gone over again and his readiness and confidence were assessed.

Bobby and Bik went through a similar set of briefings with every escaper who had a complex role to perform. Always, they looked for details they might have overlooked or contingencies they should allow for. What if an alarm was hit? What if a screw locked himself in the toilet? What if the lorry driver is too nervous or refuses to carry out his role? All these and more occupied their minds right up to the day of the escape.

The men were briefed on how they were to act towards screws during the escape. They had to psychologically crush them from the first second in a confrontation. An aggressive expression and manner were necessary — screws must immediately believe that the escaper meant business. They rehearsed how to act in an intimidating manner in order to convince a screw that they would shoot or stab him if he offered the slightest resistance. The more their approach was successful, the less likely it would be that any screw would resist.

Those to be armed with guns were told to stand open-legged with their gun held out straight in both hands. It was a stance designed to show they were ready, if not eager, to fire.

A policy on when to open fire was very carefully thrashed out over the weeks before the escape. Noise from gunshots was something to be avoided – in order to maintain stealth – and it was important to brief men in a way which accommodated that concern, but not to the degree where it would make them reluctant to open fire in circumstances where it was necessary.

The men were told that, as is the case on any operation, the decision to pull the trigger was to be taken at the crucial moment by each man himself. But there were guidelines. It would be necessary to open fire if a screw acted in a way which threatened the operation, an escaper or an escaper's weapon, or if he tried to reach an alarm button or attempted to raise the alarm in any way. In any of those situations warning shots should not be fired because the screw would be beyond talking to. The aim would be to shoot to stop the target, not to scare him.

What had for months been known only to a handful of men was now spreading to include more and more. It was a security headache. Airtight security does not last forever and there would eventually be a slip. Someone who did not know about the escape would notice the preparations or overhear an unguarded comment. Or someone would speak out of turn or be unable to resist the temptation to tell his wife or his best friend — everyone has friends whom they trust and those friends have themselves got friends they can trust. Experience showed that once

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there was a leak it was almost impossible to prevent it from spreading

There was, therefore, an urgency to complete the preparations as quickly as possible and to set the earliest feasible date for the escape. It was decided to go on Sunday, 18 September. That was later changed to 25 September, when it was realised that the All-Ireland Football Final was to be held on the 18th and there was sure to be a lot of traffic and checkpoints at the border.

A Sunday was chosen because it was a quiet day in the jail. There was no prison work and no visits and there were less crews on duty than normal. There was almost no movement about the jail and a relaxed, almost lazy atmosphere pervaded the place.

On the two Sundays before the 25th, the men who were to take the circle of the block made dry runs. Each of them had a small watch which had been smuggled into the jail. The takeover required precise timing. On each occasion they successfully got everyone into position at the right time. The dry runs also acclimatised the screws to having more than the usual number of prisoners in the circle on a Sunday afternoon.

A major complication arose when, on Wednesday, 21 September, two prisoners John Pickering and Jackie McMullan, who had been briefed for roles in the tally lodge, were moved off the block. It was a tragedy for them and they were devastated. It also

cast a cloud over the other escapers, but in the days that were left they had to reorganise and carry on.

Another problem arose when Kieran Fleming broke his arm playing football. He had also been briefed to take over the tally lodge. He wanted to continue with his role but Bobby reckoned that his plaster cast would have looked suspicious.

A few days before the escape the men who were to be armed were shown the weapon they would be carrying so that they could familiarise themselves with it.

Rab Kerr was given a .25 automatic and his first reaction was that it was tiny. Would anyone believe it was a gun and not a toy? He was reassured that screws would be more familiar with that calibre of weapon than would an IRA Volunteer, who would be used to heavier weapons. The screws would believe the threat was real and a heavier calibre weapon would serve no useful purpose other than to make the carrier feel more at ease with the increased power.

The preparations were now complete. On the Saturday night many of the men wondered what the reaction to the escape would be. They knew it would have a major impact and would rock the British state in Ireland.

It was conceived with the

objective of returning as many Volunteers to the struggle as possible - as is the case with all escapes. But it would have other effects. It would raise the morale of the nationalist people, and of everyone in the Republican Movement at a time when the tactic of paid perjurers was at its height.

It would also have the effect within the jail of shattering the confidence and morale of the prison administration.

The enthusiasm for the escape was aided by the prisoners' experiences during the years of protest and hunger strike. They had seen the British allow their comrades to die a slow, agonising death. And now they had a fierce determination to show the British, and particularly Thatcher, that not only had they failed to defeat the republican prisoners but had helped fuel the flames of resistance. A clear manifestation of this would come in the blowing open of the impregnable H-Blocks.



• Some of the captured weapons used in the escape, including a replica (above)

# Morning of the escape

**E**DDIE O'CONNOR was relieved when his cell door opened on Sunday morning and he wrapped a towel around himself to walk up the wing into the showers. He had been up half the night, pacing the cell floor, flicking across the radio stations to find some music to pass the time. For weeks he had studied maps and plans of the tally lodge, until he felt he had a photographic memory. He had been repeatedly briefed and quizzed on his role until he could visualise every second of the operation. Now, at last, the day had come. As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he looked around.

Like himself, the 15 men in A Wing who knew there was to be an escape were intent on presenting an outward appearance of calm and normality. Inside, their stomachs were knotted in tense anticipation.

The four wings went through a normal Sunday morning routine. Floors were swept and mopped, men washed amid the usual banter, breakfast was eaten and small groups walked and chatted in the yard. Bobby Storey was happy to see nothing was out of place.

Bik carried out his usual morning duties. He went to the front of the block, collected the milk and breakfast and delivered it on his trolley to the four wings. On his travels he discovered which screws would be on duty that afternoon. He reported back with a list of those whose uniforms would fit the men assigned to secure the tally lodge. He added the name of a screw with a reputation for washing only once a month and whose uniform was so shiny and stained, it didn't need a coat hanger - it was said he took it off and simply propped it up against the wall.

"I don't think much of the uniform you're getting," he said to Bobby.

Bik had also been told to find out if any screws they thought might be uncooperative were to be on duty that afternoon. The prison-

ers had built up character profiles on the screws in H7 and had watched how they reacted during the regular crises that were part of life in the blocks. One name stood out: John Adams. He had a reputation for being stupid, petty and stubborn - one of those screws who, insignificant in the outside world, enjoyed the sense of power that a set of keys and a locked grille gave him. And he was to be on duty in the control room, the most crucial post in the block.

In D Wing, Rab Kerr was holding a final briefing for the men who were to take the wing when a screw shouted in, "Rab Kerr, stand by to go to Musgrave Park Hospital." For almost a year Rab had been waiting for a routine operation and now here he was being called on the morning of the escape. He informed Bobby, who told him to say that he no longer needed the operation, that there must be some mistake in their records. He wasn't to give a point blank refusal, for fear of raising suspicion. Rab told the screw to cancel the transport and he would sort it out with the doctor in the morning. The screw seemed to accept this without question.

Bobby then informed all the wing OCs that if anyone else was called for the hospital, they were to go without hesitation, irrespec-

tive of their role in the escape. It was reckoned they could get away with one refusal, but another might raise suspicions. Fortunately, no one else was called.

Mass for the entire block was said in C Wing and there was a higher than usual attendance. Afterwards, some of those going on the escape shook hands. No words were spoken - these gestures of best wishes said everything.

Seamus McElwaine sat down to his dinner in D Wing. His plate was piled high and he gratefully tucked in. Some of the lads couldn't eat and Séamus took full advantage of their nervousness. On a day like this he reckoned he would need all the energy he could store up.

Everyone was locked in his cell at 12.30, the final hour and a half before the countdown began. Eddie O'Connor, Séamus McGlinchey and Barry Art were in Cell 26 in A Wing, a double cell built to accommodate four men. Eddie and Séamus were busy making tyings and ponchos (for use when the screws in the block had been captured). It was then that they told Barry there was to be an escape that afternoon. He was the 38th and final escaper to be briefed. He had been sentenced only a few weeks before to a life sentence, with a recommendation that he serve at least 20 years - and now here he was, the luckiest prisoner in the history of Long Kesh.

Despite the evidence of Eddie's and Séamus's busy preparations, Barry's reaction was, "Ha' Such a yarn." It was quite a while before he accepted that they weren't pulling his leg.

Later, someone was to describe that lock-up as the longest week he had spent in his life.



• The yard in H7

# The takeover of H7

THE PRISONERS were finally unlocked at 2.05pm and throughout the block, the escapers prepared to move into position.

The circle team of seven (Bobby, Bik, Gerry Kelly, Brendy Mead, Tony McAllister, Rab Kerr and Séan McGlinchey) were armed with six pistols (two with silencers) and a chisel. The prisoners who were to seize the wings were armed with a variety of hammers and chisels taken from the hobbies rooms. A man was posted in each hobbies room to ensure that no prisoner ignorant of the escape innocently complained to the screws about the sudden shortage of tools.

Areas of the block were to be taken starting from the screws' canteen and spreading out in a ripple effect to the rest of the circle, and then to the connecting corridors and the four wings.

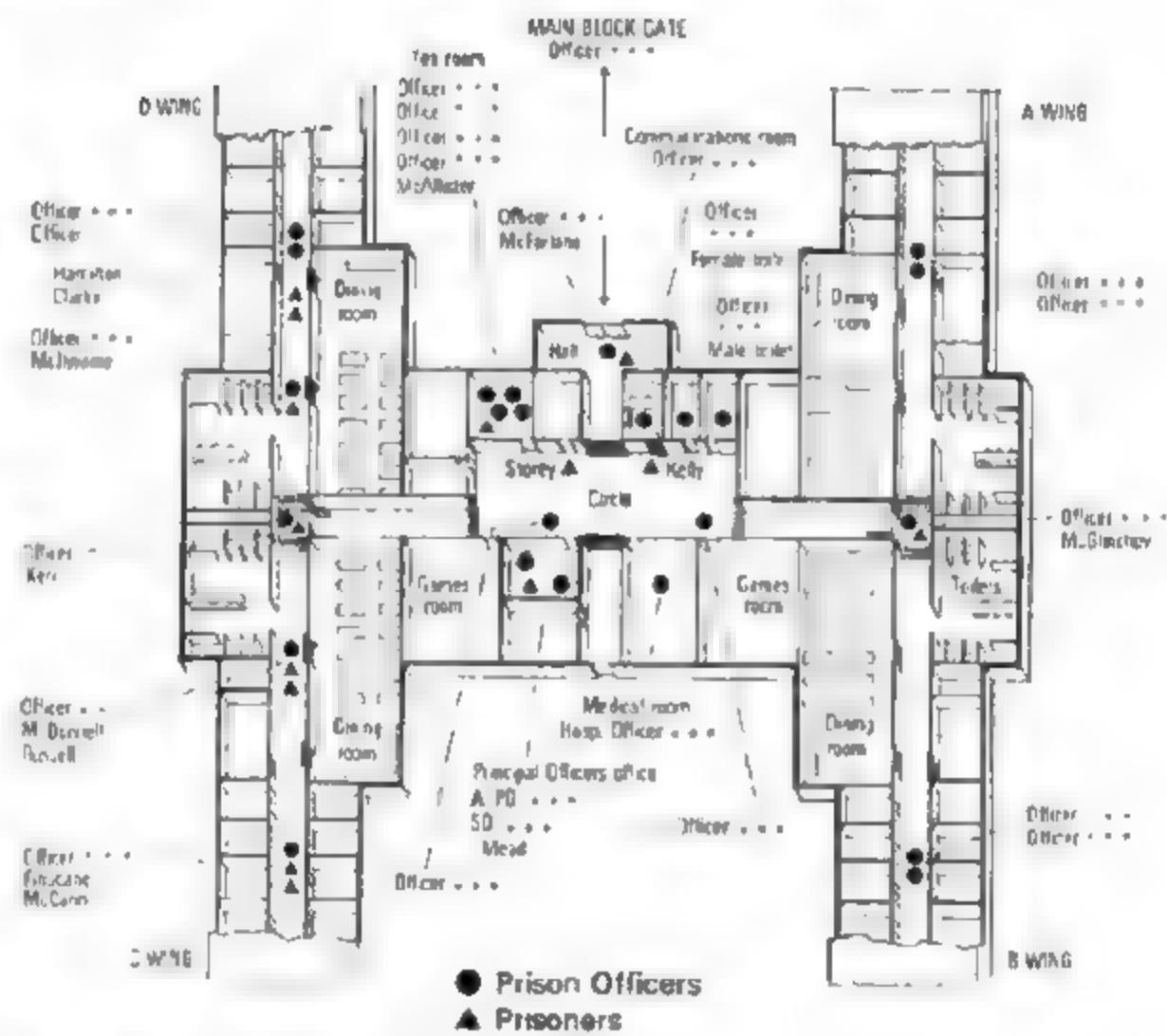
Bik was the first to move out to the circle, followed ten minutes later by Brendy and Tony, and then by Gerry. All four went into the storeroom as if to busy themselves, a practice which had been well established. Chairs and large bins were moved into the passageway so that any screw who wanted to relax in the stores would have to go to the canteen instead.

At 2.25, Bik flooded the governor's office and the welfare office with liquid polish, as if in preparation for polishing the floor. This ensured that no screw would venture into either room. There was an alarm button and a telephone in each office. The screws would now be confined to areas where the prisoners wanted them.

The SO was due to return before 2.30 to relieve the PO, who normally left immediately. Then, when Bik judged that the circle had settled into a normal Sunday routine, he was to call down the wings and ask for the bumper (a floor cleaning machine). This was to be the signal for the start of the operation.

The SO didn't arrive until 2.40, and the PO didn't leave (he was doing some paperwork). Bik waited anxiously. He knew everyone was straining at the leash – he would have to give the signal soon.

In the wings the different teams were



• H-Block 7 at the time of the takeover

ready to move into position. There were three screws on duty in each wing and there were three alarm buttons – one in the canteen, and one each at the top and bottom of the wing.

Each wing had different routines planned to allow the escapers to be in position close to the screws and alarm buttons. In the canteen, Joe Simpson had begun to smooth clothes, the ironing board placed to block the screw's path to the alarm button. Paul Kane started talking to Joe. A couple minutes later, however, the screw left his post and went to the circle for a tea break.

At the top of C Wing, Blute McDonnell and Goose Russell tidied a pile of newspapers five feet from the screw they were shadowing. Dermy Finucane's role was to defend the alarm button and to signal the takeover of the wing when he saw the screw between the C and D Wings arrested. He stood beside the alarm button talking across to Séamus Clarke, who was similarly guarding the alarm button in D Wing.

In the washroom ten feet from Dermy, Jaz McCann was washing a shirt, a ham-

mer hidden in the waistband of his trousers. He could clearly see the screw he was to take and he wondered what sort of resistance he would offer. The screw was stockily built and to Jaz he had the look of a fighter about him. His dread was that he would fail to restrain him and he would succeed in pressing the alarm. This played on his mind for a while, until he thought to himself, "That screw stands between me and freedom."

The other four escapers in the wing were part of the circle team, so two members of the rearguard defended the alarm button at the bottom of the wing. It was planned that none of the rearguard was to be involved in actions where they could be recognised but in this case their involvement was unavoidable. It was unlikely, however, that any screw would be at the bottom of the wing.

Bobby Storey was at the sink next to Jaz, also washing a shirt. They caught the screw glancing in their direction and wondered if he could feel the tension and suspect something was afoot. The minutes

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• JOE SIMPSON

dragged by. It was after 2.30 - Bobby could not understand why there was a delay

They continued washing their shirts, an anxious silence between them. At 2.40, Bobby whispered to Jaz. He was concerned: "We have to get the shout in the next couple of minutes."

Meanwhile, Bik watched as two screws crossed the circle, going for a tea break or to the toilet. John Adams sat contented in the control room engrossed in his Sunday paper, oblivious to the world beyond his small, secure space. And in the PO's office the SO and PO were lost in conversation. The circle was empty. It was now or never.

"A and B, is the bumper down there?" Bik shouted loudly. Every escaper who heard it felt a surge of adrenalin. "It's not here, Bik," Seán McGlinchey shouted back. As arranged, the bumper was in C Wing. In A and B Wings the teams moved into position and Seán counted down his two minute wait before he was to move into the circle with dirty dinner trays. This was to be his excuse to get out of the wing and into position to take the screw in the area between A and B Wings.

Bik moved across to the C and D side of the circle. "Sammy," Bik shouted to the screw on duty, "is the bumper there?" Sammy asked down the wings. "It's here," Bobby replied. "I'll bring it out." Once again the word "bumper" alerted the teams to move into position. Rab Kerr began his 90 second countdown. His role was to take the screw in the area between C and D Wings.

Bobby discarded the shirt he had by now washed almost threadbare, and asked Jaz if the gun in his waistband was showing. Jaz assured him it wasn't and wished

him good luck. Bobby collected the bumper from the canteen and made his way to the circle

He arrived in the store and was told that the delay was because the PO hadn't left the block. Just then, Brendy came in to say that the SO, Geordie Smiley, was standing in the circle. The presence of both the PO and SO was a difficulty. They couldn't afford to have either of them loose in the circle. It was quickly decided that Brendy would tell Smiley that he needed to talk to him in the PO's office. He had to keep him talking until the first part of the operation - securing the screws' canteen - was completed.

This wasn't in Brendy's brief and as he made his way out to the circle he was very nervous. He met Smiley coming through the grille into the store. "Ah, Geordie," said Brendy, his voice quivering. "I have to see you about a problem I have. It's wrecking me."

He sensed Brendy was in some kind of danger. "What is it? What's wrong, kid?" he asked.

"I have to get a move out of the block. The RA's gonna kill me."

"Why?"

"Look, can we go into your office and I'll tell you, please?"

"Sure," Smiley said and he ushered Brendy into the office with a concerned hand around his shoulder.

Bik carried his mop and bucket across to the welfare office but a screw rushed in before him to make a phone call. "I have to clean the office," Bik said sharply. "It'll be a while, Bik," the screw replied. "It's 13 digits."

Bik's heart sank to the depths. "Thirteen digits? Where the hell are you phoning to?"



• JIM 'JAZ' McCANN



• ROBERT 'GOOSE' RUSSELL

he barked

"Canada," said the screw. "You don't expect me to run up a phone bill that size at home, when I can get a free one here."

He closed the door and sat down at the phone. Bik rushed back to the store and hurriedly explained the dilemma to Bobby and the others. It was a delay they could ill afford. There was no option - Bik would have to go over and urge him out of the office. But he would have to be careful about it.

Just as Bik was crossing the circle, the screw came out of the office, smiling. "Fooled you there, Bik. I was just phoning a mate in HI to swap an evening duty this week." Bik, greatly relieved, uttered an acknowledgement and went in to clean the floor. He finished quickly and made his way to clean the grille at the front door, beside the screw he was to take.

Meanwhile, Rab and Seán had left the empty food containers at the front door and were making their way back towards their wings. They casually joked across the circle to each other, allowing them an excuse to linger for a few seconds between the grilles.

Rab then went to the observation hatch and looked into C Wing canteen. He was eight feet from the screw. He pretended to be trying to attract someone's attention as he waited for the signal from Bobby in the circle. His gun was in a pocket he had sewn inside his light jacket and he wondered if the screw could see it was pulling his jacket out of shape. At the far side of the block, Seán was similarly waiting close to the screw he was shadowing.

The circle team was now in position. They waited for the signal to move.

In C Wing, Jaz had moved from the sink



\* The circle in H7 following the escape — on the left of the picture is the buffer which was the signal for the takeover of the block

to the canteen grille and pretended to watch the television. He was now two paces from his screw. On TV, a motor racing grand prix was about to start. Jaz thought it was ironic that at the same moment the cars were on the grid, every escaper was in position ready for the signal to go.

Tony left the store and told the circle screw he would make him a cup of tea in the screws' canteen. Bobby and Gerry then left the store and stood chatting in the circle. Tony called the circle screw into the canteen. Bobby followed him in and closed the door. There were five screws eating at a table.

Bobby and Tony pulled their guns.

"Get on the floor and do it quietly," ordered Bobby. There was a shocked silence. The screws sat down, staring at the guns. Bobby activated the slide of his pistol and threw a round up the breech. The screws scrambled to the floor. Tony covered them. He had a silenced gun and would have been the only one to fire, had it been necessary.

Bobby concealed his gun and left the canteen, closing the door behind him. In the circle, he looked quickly around and signalled first to Gerry, then to Bik, Sean and Rab to arrest their designated screws.

When Bobby nodded in his direction, any nervousness that Gerry felt was

replaced by total concentration. He knew the importance of securing the control room as it was in direct radio contact with the prison's central control room. Adams was sitting at a desk, his left side to Gerry. With a movement he had rehearsed so many times, Gerry took his silver .25 pistol in two hands and lowered his frame, until the gun was pointing at Adams' head. When Adams turned he'd be looking straight into the muzzle three feet away and he would see Gerry's head slightly above the gun.

"Don't move an inch or I'll blow your head off."

Gerry's face displayed his intent. "Don't touch anything at all," he continued as Adams looked around, startled. "Do exactly as I tell you and you'll be all right. Put both hands on your head. Now, very slowly get out of the chair and kneel on the floor, facing me." Adams did as he was told. "Keep both hands on your head. Now lie down flat on your stomach. Use your hands. Now put your hands back on top of your head."

Gerry pushed open the steel grille and held his prisoner at gunpoint. "John," he said, "we have taken over the block and we are well armed. If you do as you're told, then you won't get hurt. If the central control room gets in touch, you will act nor-

mally and answer questions normally. I will cover you at all times and if you do anything to try and warn them, I will shoot you without hesitation. If they ask about any alarms going off, tell them you'll go and check. After a few seconds, assure them it was an accident as if you've checked it out. Assure them you will reset the alarm and that all is OK."

"What if they don't believe me?" Adams asked. "Make them believe you or you're dead."

Bik's gun had a silencer. He was to arrest the screw at the front door and if he had to fire a shot, it was important that it didn't alert the screw at the front gate only 40 yards away. His screw was standing just outside the door in the yard. Bik told him he was wanted in the circle and when he came in, Bik shoved the pistol into his ribs and told him to lie on the floor. He covered the screw's head with a pillowcase.

Bobby's task was to arrest any screws in the toilets and the Medical Officer's room. He went first to the MO's room. It was unexpectedly locked. He knocked on the door and called urgently to the MO as if someone needed medical attention. The MO opened the door without suspicion and was arrested at gunpoint. As Bobby was escorting him to the screws' canteen, a screw emerged from the men's toilet beside

# THE GREATEST ESCAPE

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the control room.

Gerry and Bobby turned instinctively to the screw and both ordered him onto the floor. Bobby turned to the canteen to leave the MO in Tony's charge and returned immediately.

Gerry's attention was divided between covering Adams in the control room and the screw on the floor of the circle. Just as Bobby returned, Adams, taking advantage of Gerry's divided attention, rose from the ground and tried to close the door of the control room. He put his weight behind the door with Gerry pushing against him. There was an alarm button in the control room but he couldn't reach it unless he moved away from the door. The door was open just wide enough to allow a gun to be pointed at him. Two rounds were fired, striking him above the eye. He slumped against the door.

The sound of the shots was heard throughout the block. It startled the PO and Smiley, the SO. Brendy immediately drew his gun and went forward, screaming at Smiley not to go out and to lie on the floor. He pointed his gun from him to the PO, who was frozen in his chair.

In the circle, Bobby ordered the screw off the floor and escorted him to the canteen. He opened the door of the women's



• GERRY KELLY

toilet where he found a screw with his hands up. "No heroes here," the screw said. "Where do you want me?" He too was taken to the canteen at gunpoint.

Bobby then heard the sound of an argument from the PO's office. Smiley had lunged at Brendy and hit him with his fist. They punched at each other. Brendy knocked him back and he came at him again - all the while Brendy was yelling at

the PO not to move. Suddenly, the door was kicked open and Bobby was in the office.

He pointed his gun at Smiley. "Get on the floor and you won't be hurt." Smiley refused. Bobby turned to Brendy: "Shoot the PO if he doesn't get on the floor." Brendy walked over and pointed his weapon at the PO's head. "Are you getting down?" asked Bobby. Smiley slowly got down. He looked defeated and humiliated and Brendy couldn't help but feel sorry for him. Bobby left.

Smiley was lying on the ground looking angrily at Brendy, and the fact that he had been so gullible seemed to be driving him to get up and get at him again. "Geordie, please don't try and get up," said Brendy. "I don't want to have to shoot you." It seemed to dawn on him then that this was really happening and Brendy was no longer the 'kid' that he had slagged and joked with in the months before.

As the first moves to secure the circle were underway, the wings were being taken. On Bobby's signal, Rab produced his .25 automatic and took three paces towards the screw, who was reading a newspaper in the area between C and D Wings. Rab grabbed his head with his left hand and pushed the gun into his temple with his right. The screw froze and offered no resistance. He was pushed to the floor. Rab produced a pillowcase and put it over his head. He reassured him that, providing he did what he was told, he would come to no harm.

Rab's arrest of the screw was the signal for C and D Wings to be seized. In C Wing, Jaz leapt towards his screw, locked his arm around his neck and told him to get down on the floor. He got down immediately. Similarly, Bluto and Goose met no resistance. In D Wing, one screw initially resisted and received a slight stab wound, but the wing was secured within seconds.

At the other side of the block, Seán, armed with a chisel, had also successfully overpowered his screw. The screws in A and B Wings had turned towards the noise and they were immediately arrested. In A Wing, one received a blow from a hammer but again his injuries were minor.

The block was now in IRA control. All the screws had been arrested and no alarms had been sounded.

At this stage, the screws didn't know what was to happen - neither did any of the prisoners who weren't escapers or part of



• PO's office in H7

the rearguard. Some thought it was a planned act of revenge against screws who had beaten prisoners during the blanket protest. For many of the screws, this thought was uppermost in their minds too.

The escapers had all been briefed to hold their positions and their screws until Bobby had obtained a report from each location. This was done to avoid confusion and to allow everyone to calm down. It also allowed for unforeseen developments to be dealt with.

In C Wing, there was complete silence. Hooded screws were lying face down at the top of the wing, with Jaz and Blute kneeling across their backs. Three masked members of the rearguard, armed with hammers and chisels, stood over them. The men in the canteen, uninvolved in the escape and with no prior knowledge of it, were told to remain where they were. The TV had been switched off.

The silence was broken by the sound of whistling from the bottom of the wing. Paul Duffy, a prisoner who knew nothing of the escape and who had heard none of the commotion, emerged from his cell and walked up the wing, arms swinging, whistling away, without a care in the world and oblivious to all around him. He walked about a dozen paces before he just fizzled out. The whistle trailed off, the stride became a tentative step before coming to a halt. The jaunty swinging diminished, until his arms hung limply by his side and the smiling face changed to puzzlement, then disbelief. He froze about 15 feet from the scene at the top of the wing. Amid laughter, Joe Simpson took him gently by the arm and led him into the canteen.

In the circle, Adams had to be replaced in case anyone outside the block contacted the control room. A screw from D Wing, who had experience of working in the control room, had been identified earlier as a replacement for Adams. Bobby went to D Wing and took him to the circle. The screw was very pale and nervous. He saw Adams



• GERARD 'BLUTE' McDONNELL

lying wounded and he was told that he too would be shot if he didn't agree to operate the control room as though all was normal. He agreed and was told to lie on the floor of the control room, guarded by Gerry.

Bobby then took the MO from the

screws' canteen to Adams, who had been put on a mattress on the floor of the women's toilet. The MO agreed to treat him and gave his word that he would not make any attempt to raise the alarm. He was guarded throughout his treatment. (Adams later made a full recovery - he was back on duty within weeks.)

The next phase of the operation was to secure the front gate of the block. Seán McGlinchey and Joe Corey stripped two screws of their uniforms, donned them and went to the circle. Seán was given a pistol. Bik then walked down the yard to the front gate with a brush and shovel slung over his shoulder and a silenced gun in his pocket. He was conscious of the eyes of his comrades following him from cell windows on either side of the yard. He found himself laughing nervously.

Joe and Seán followed 30 yards behind, close enough to be seen to be escorting Bik but far enough away from the screw at the gate to be unable to recognise them.

The screw admitted Bik to the area between the two front gates. It was a long-established practice that he cleaned this area. When the screw opened the gate for the escort, Bik stuck the silencer to the back of his neck and Seán pointed a pistol at his face. He was well and truly caught. The screw's keys were taken and Seán and Joe took up the front gate duty. The entrance to H8 was opposite H7, only 30 yards away, but it was unoccupied and therefore no screws were on duty at its front gate.

Bik ordered the screw to put his hands in his pockets and to walk slowly towards the front door. There were alarm buttons to the right and left in the entrance to the circle and Bik made it clear that if he attempted to run towards either of them, he would immediately be shot. He was taken into the circle and placed under Tony's guard in the screws' canteen.

All areas of H7 were now secure. Preparations began for the arrival of the food lorry.



• The control room in H7

# Arrival of the food lorry

**B**OBY CALLED for a report from each wing. "A Wing secure. No alarms sounded. No Volunteers injured. One screw injured – not serious." Once the four reports were in, Bobby instructed all wings to take their captured screws to cell 26, the double cell in each wing.

All orders and reports were given in the same crisp manner which was designed to emphasise, particularly to the screws, that an efficient military operation was under way. Bobby held a clipboard, ticking off each task as it was completed.

The screws in the wings were stripped of their uniforms and given ponchos, made from prison blankets, to cover themselves. No screw was degraded by being left half-naked. They were then tied up. The uniforms were put in brown bags and each bag was marked with the size of the uniform (small, medium or large) and left in the circle.

At the same time, in each wing, an escaper gathered together all those prisoners not involved in their operation. He told them to lock up in their cells and turn their radios on at full volume. This was to protect them from future prosecution – they could truthfully say they saw and heard nothing.

Six escapers were called out to the circle. Séamus McElwaine and Séamus Clarke took up position at the front gate in order to escort anyone back to the block, whom Séán and Joe would arrest. (As it happened, no arrests were made.) Peter Hamilton tied up the PO and SO in the PO's office and Goose Russell and Dennis Cummings tied up the other screws. Marcus Murray stood at the front door to monitor the front gate and alert Bobby to any developments, including the arrival of the food lorry.

At this point the rearguard was called out. They wore hoods and ponchos and

kept talking to a minimum, never referring to each other by name. Their immediate duty was to guard the screws while the escapers prepared for the arrival of the food lorry.

Over the next 15 minutes the screws were moved to the two classrooms, one off the hallway connecting the circle to A and B wings, the other on the C and D side of the block.

They were tied together in pairs. Some of the screws found the pillowcase hoods made it difficult for them to breathe. The prisoners guarding them occasionally lifted the hoods slightly and fanned the screws' faces with table tennis bats.

An escaper in each classroom took the screws' names and the order in which they were seated. This was in case there was a phone call for any of them – the list would be consulted and the screw reached immediately.

The PO was tied to the chair in his office and guarded by a member of the rearguard. He was to answer any incoming phone calls.

In the circle, 13 escapers donned



• SEAMUS CLARKE

screws' uniforms. Nine of them were to take the tally lodge and main gate; the others might have to be used in an emergency.

Some men also shaved off moustaches in order to disguise themselves.

The circle was full of prisoners, members of the rearguard and escapers changing into uniforms. Clothes, boots and shoes lay about on the floor. There was a serious climate and yet an air of excitement. The smooth takeover of the block had added to the sense of confidence.

Brendy Mead was one of those detailed to question a screw about his car – its colour, type and exact location in the car park outside the perimeter wall. He went into one of the classrooms and put a plan of the car park at the bottom of the pillowcase covering a screw's head, untied his hands and asked him to mark an X in the place where his car was parked.

Brendy told the screw that the IRA had taken over the entire jail and that he would be phoning his comrades in the car park to verify what the screw told him. "If you are lying, you will be shot," said Brendy. The screw insisted that the information was correct. He was asked to describe his car keys and this he did. His hands were re-tied and Brendy went off to find the keys. But there had been a mix-up with the uniforms and Harry Murray was wearing the uniform meant for Brendy, jangling the keys in his pocket.

Kieran Fleming then went into each classroom and read out a prepared statement designed to deter any thoughts among the screws of brutalising those prisoners left in the block after the escape, or of perjuring themselves in any subsequent court cases.



• MARCUS MURRAY

# THE GREATEST ESCAPE

IRIS



• KIERAN FLEMING

"What has taken place here today was a carefully-planned exercise to secure the release of a substantial number of POWs. The block is now under our control. If anyone has been assaulted or injured, it has been as a result of his refusal to cooperate with us. It is not our intention to settle old scores, ill-treat, nor degrade any of you regardless of your past, though should anyone try to underestimate or wish to challenge our position, he or they will be severely dealt with. Anyone who refuses to comply with our instructions now or in the future will feel the wrath of the Republican Movement."

"Should any member of the prison administration ill-treat, victimise or commit any acts of perjury against republican POWs in any follow-up inquiries, judicial or otherwise, they will forfeit their lives for what we will see as a further act of repression against the nationalist people."

"To conclude, we give you our word as republicans that none of you will come to any harm, providing you cooperate fully with us. Anyone who refuses to do so will suffer the ultimate consequences – death. Allow common sense to prevail, do not be used as cannon fodder by the prison administration nor the faceless bureaucrats at Stormont and Whitehall."

"Camp Staff, Republican POWs."

The lorry was expected at 3.15. At 3.30 a prison van delivering the Sunday papers arrived at the front gate of the block. It was much earlier than usual and hadn't featured

in the plans. But the driver simply threw the papers on the ground outside the gate and drove off.

As the van left, the food lorry arrived. Séan and Joe opened the first gate to allow the lorry into the area between the gates and then, in keeping with normal routine, they closed the gate behind it before opening the inner gate to allow the lorry into the front yard of the block. The driver noticed nothing untoward.

From his position at the front door, Marcus saw the lorry and told Bobby of its arrival. The prisoners got ready to enact a carefully worked-out scenario.

As the lorry swung round at the front door, Bobby, Gerry and Bik walked out to meet it. Bobby opened the driver's door and Gerry pulled the driver out while Bik arrested the orderly at the passenger side.

The driver was force-marched at gunpoint to the medical room. As he entered the circle he passed two masked prisoners pointing pistols at his face. He was to be overawed and intimidated in order to be sure he would drive the lorry out of the jail. As he crossed the circle he could see that the IRA had total control of the block.

In the medical room were four large maps. One was of the entire camp, another showed by a dotted line the route the lorry was to take to the van pool (the car park for prison vehicles) and another was of the van pool itself, showing where the lorry was to

park. The final one showed the route the lorry was to take outside the jail. The driver was sat down in front on the maps. Gerry kept a firm grip on his arm.

"This block is now in the hands of the IRA," Bobby said to the driver. "All screws who obeyed our orders are safe. One who didn't was shot in the head." The driver declined an offer to see Adams.

"We will shoot anyone who endangers our planned escape, including you." The driver nodded his head. "But if you do what you are told, you won't be harmed. Do you understand?" He replied, "Yes," in a voice that betrayed great shock.

Bobby pointed to Gerry and said to the driver, "That man will remain with you throughout the escape. He is doing 30 years and he'll shoot you without hesitation if he has to. He has nothing to lose." Gerry tightened his grip on the driver's arm.

"You are going to drive us out of the jail in your lorry," Bobby continued. "In a short while you will be taken to the lorry and tied into your seat with your foot tied to the clutch. The lock on your door will be broken and the door tied closed. Under your seat there will be a hand grenade with a seven second fuse. A string will be attached to its pin. This man" – he again indicated Gerry – "will lie across the well of the cab under your legs holding the string in one hand. He will have a pistol



• Screws' carpark – facing the main gate through which most of the escapers burst



• The C and D Wing classroom where some of the screws were held during the escape

pointed at your crotch. He'll be looking at you all the time and if he sees you trying to alert anyone or risking the operation in any way, he will pull the string on the grenade, jump free of the cab before it explodes and we will attempt to escape in the confusion caused by the explosion. We will escape - one way involves you being blown up. But if you act normally and obey orders you will come out of this unscathed." Bobby then left him for two minutes to allow his predicament to sink in.

There was no grenade, but the prisoners were confident that after seeing so many guns in a H-Block controlled by the IRA, the driver would believe almost anything.

Bobby returned. "Look, I don't want anything to happen to me," the driver said "It's only a job. I'll do exactly as I'm told."

He was then briefed on what was expected of him. To ensure that he knew the prisoners had full knowledge of his lorry's routine, Bobby told him, "We know the lorry isn't searched when passing through any internal gates. Therefore, you have no reason to leave the cab at any point

for any reason." The driver agreed.

Bobby then explained each of the maps. The driver listened to the instructions carefully and confirmed he understood them. He also agreed that the maps were accurate. Gerry and Marcus then brought him back to the lorry and tied him in. He could see a long string leading from under his seat. Gerry, wearing a screw's uniform, got into the cab and kept him at gunpoint until it was time to leave.

While the driver was being briefed, the meals were unloaded from the lorry and the men at the front gate were relieved by two members of the rearguard.

Bik went down to his cell in C Wing to get ready. He passed a hooded member of the rearguard standing outside the washroom at the top of the wing. They exchanged glances but didn't speak. He walked quickly to cell 10. It was locked. He laughed at the irony of that and called for a set of keys. Another member of the rearguard appeared and opened his cell door.

Bik changed quickly and grabbed a bag of clothes he had prepared earlier that

morning. He clanged the door behind him and hurried up the wing. The hooded figure stepped out from the washroom. As Bik stopped in front of him, he offered his right hand and said quietly, "Good luck Bik so." Bik recognised the voice. He smiled at him, gripped his hand firmly and said, "Go raibh maith agat, mo chara. See you one day."

Bobby stood in the circle, marking off each name as the men got into the lorry, those wearing uniforms nearest the back. The men boarding the lorry shook hands with the rearguard, who were anxious for the success of the operation and for the escapers' safety. Similarly, the escapers knew that the screws would seek revenge on those left behind in the block.

There were 37 men in the back of the lorry, plus Gerry in the cab. Bik brought the orderly out and put him in the passenger side. He told him to do everything Gerry told him. The hydraulic tail gate was raised and the back of the lorry closed.

"No talking - not a sound," instructed Bobby as Madra, the rearguard OC, rapped the side of the lorry in a parting gesture.

# Trouble at the tally lodge

THE LORRY shuddered into life and turned towards the front gate of the block. Once out of the block it turned left. The large hydraulic gate which gave access to the administration area of the camp was about 200 yards away. It was staffed by only one screw. The lorry slowed in front of it. There was hardly a sound outside until the rumble of the gate opening. The lorry drove a short distance into the 'airlock', the space between the two gates.

The escapers listened as the screw closed the first gate. They were ready to arrest him if he opened the back, but he didn't. (If he had been arrested, Joe Corey was to stay behind at the gate and when the alarm sounded he was to try and make his way back to H7.) The screw walked along the side of the lorry and said hello to the driver. He didn't go near the back of the lorry. He opened the second gate and the lorry drove another 200 yards towards the tally lodge and main gate.

escapers each breathed a sigh of relief. Bobby nodded to Bik. The first obstacle was overcome.

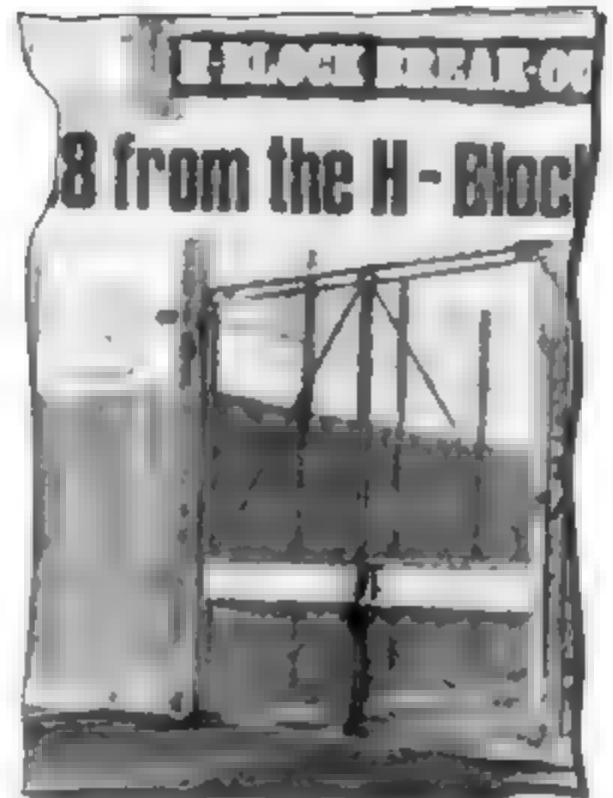
In the cab, Gerry ordered the driver to slow down and told the orderly to lie on the floor - the screw staffing the administration gate would not allow any prisoner past that point.

Shards of sunlight shone through tiny gaps in the sides and rear of the lorry. The escapers could see each other's faces; everyone looked tense and expectant.

Once again the first gate was opened and the lorry rolled in. The duty screw was whistling and they heard him joke with the driver. He didn't go near the back of the lorry. He opened the second gate and the lorry drove another 200 yards towards the tally lodge and main gate.

Just before the tally lodge the lorry swung left into the van pool. It reversed up to a grass verge which would make it easier for the tally lodge team to leave the lorry without being seen.

The shutter was raised and the nine-



• *An Phoblacht/Republican News,*  
29 August 1983

strong team vaulted over the tail gate onto the verge. They were Bobby, Bik, Brendy Mead, Seán McGlinchey, Rab Kerr, Eddie O'Connor, Dennis Cummings, Jimmy Burns and Harry Murray. The orderly was removed from the cab and put into the back of the lorry.

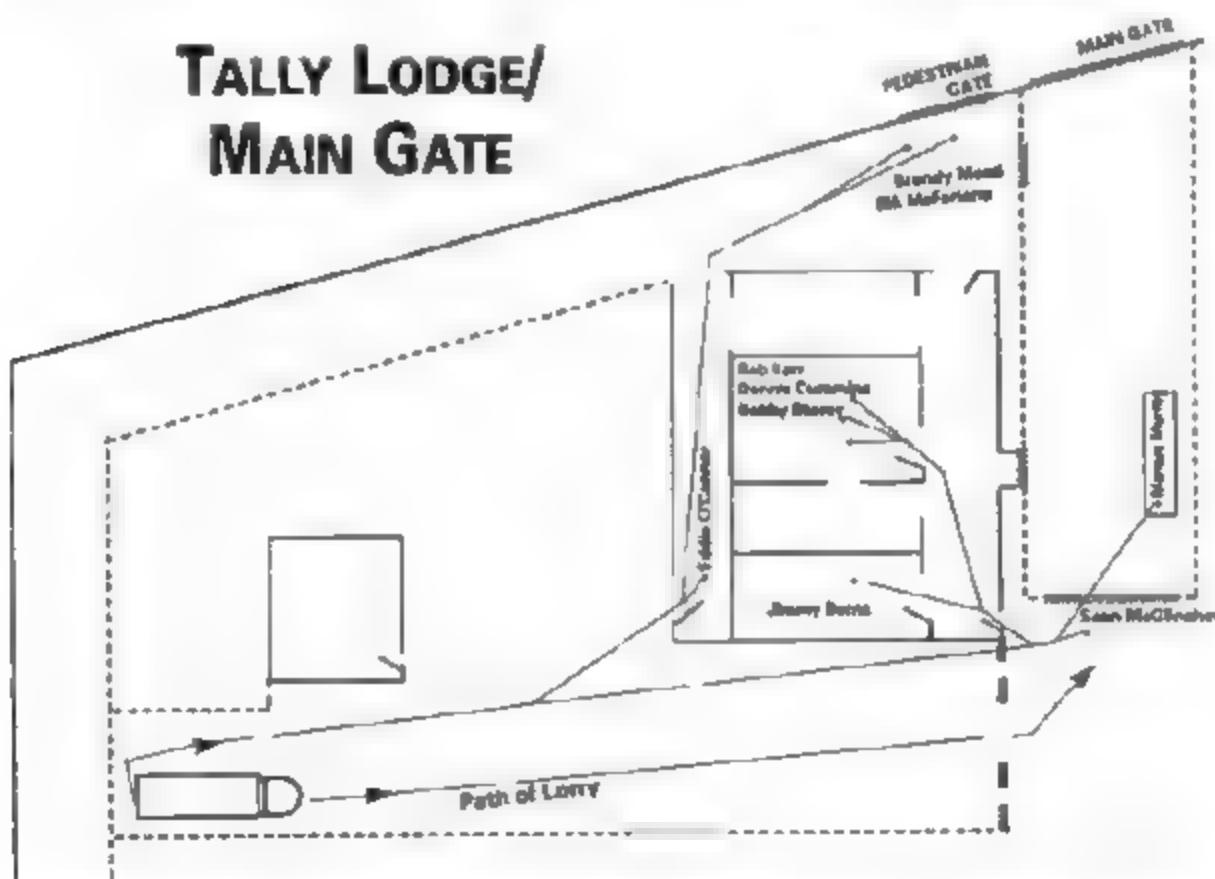
Bobby went to the driver to remind him of his role in the next phase of the operation. Gerry sat in the passenger seat, and while the driver's attention was on Bobby, Gerry gave his pistol to Harry and replaced it with a replica from his pocket. The nine men were armed with six pistols and three chisels.

The escapers were by now aware that they were behind schedule. When they saw a large group of screws in the distance walking towards the tally lodge, they realised their task was going to be even more difficult than they had thought. The 20-minute delay in the arrival of the food lorry at H7 meant they were going to encounter a fresh shift of screws at the tally lodge.

The nine men walked casually across the van pool, trying to appear like a loose group of screws going off duty. When they were halfway to the tally lodge, Bobby took off his hat and replaced it again. This was the signal for Gerry to order the driver to slowly drive the 50 yards towards the front gate.

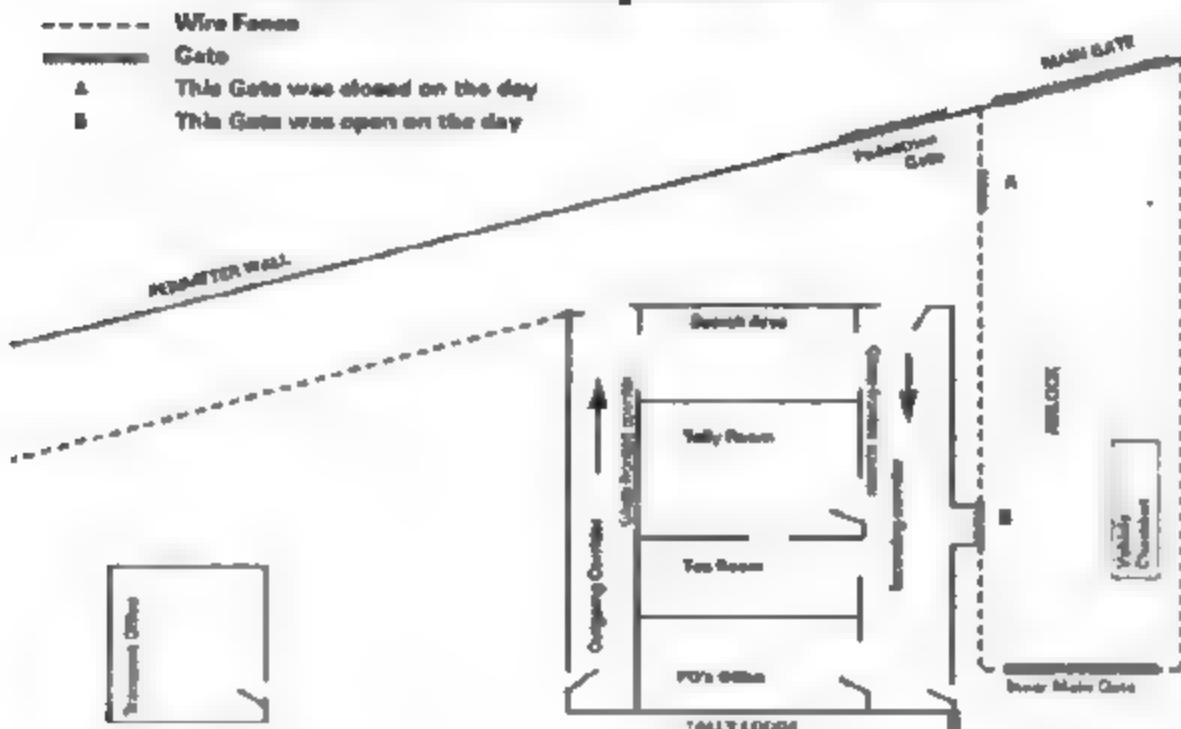
A screw coming on duty came out of the tally lodge towards them. He stared at Bobby. Bobby knew him and fearing he had been recognised, he stuck his pistol into the screw's groin and arrested him. He

## TALLY LODGE/ MAIN GATE



\* Diagram showing the position taken up by escapers dressed in screws' uniform

## TALLY LODGE/MAIN GATE



was handed over to Bik who took him towards the tally lodge.

The nine escapers surveyed the scene in front of them. For weeks they had studied maps and plans of the complex. Some of them had seen it from a distance on their way to the prison hospital. Now they compared the picture they had built up in their minds with the reality. There was the portacabin tally lodge building, with the transport office behind it. They could also see the main vehicle gate with a hut in the 'airlock'.

Directly above the main gate was the British Army lookout post - 20 feet across and 20 feet up from the tally lodge. It had a clear view of the whole complex and they could see a British soldier - armed with an SLR - staffing it.

Each of the escapers had memorised the routine of screws changing internal and external passes in the tally lodge as they entered and left the jail. The nine men had studied the layout of incoming and outgoing corridors, the search room and the tally room. Now they saw their objective and it was just as they imagined it to be.

The plan involved arresting all the screws in the tally lodge, at the main gate and the pedestrian gate. Screws going on or off duty were to be arrested and held in the tally lodge.

Gerry was then to get on the floor of the lorry and Harry and Goose, in uniform and with three external passes, were to sit on the passenger seat. The lorry, with 33 escapers on board, would then drive through the main gate to the external gate, over half a mile away.

an ordinary playing card - the suit changed every day.

The screw would then return to his car and drive the short distance to the external gate, which was staffed by a screw and a British soldier armed with a pistol. He would hand in the playing card and drive through the gate out of the camp onto a public road.

The lorry was to follow the same procedure. If, at the external tally lodge, a search was attempted or the screw on duty recognised Goose as he exchanged the external passes, he was to be arrested. Goose would then stay behind, to be picked up by the tally lodge rearguard who were to leave the camp five minutes after the lorry in a car belonging to a screw from H7.

Everyone was then to rendezvous with a heavily-armed force of IRA Volunteers a few miles from the jail. They hoped to be in safe houses by the time the news of their escape broke. But things were not to go according to plan.

The tally lodge team split into three groups as they crossed the van pool. Seán and Harry reached the main gate at the same time as the lorry and when the screw staffing the gate came out, he was arrested by Seán and ordered to open the gate and let the lorry into the 'airlock'. Harry then went to see if there was a screw in the vehicle check hut

Bobby, Rab, Dennis and Jimmy entered the tally lodge through the exit of the incoming corridor. Jimmy went into the PO's office. Two screws were coming on duty so Bobby arrested them and brought them into the tally room where Rab and



• A view of the tally lodge and inner main gate from the inside of the jail

# THE GREATEST ESCAPE

IRIS

Dennis had arrested the SO and screws there. They initially thought it was a training exercise and Bobby had to take off his hat and glasses to convince the SO that it was for real.

Five seconds later, Bik, Brendy and Eddie entered the tally lodge through the outgoing corridor. Eddie was to guard the door and arrest any screw coming off duty. The screw, who Bobby had arrested in the van pool, was pushed to the floor beside Eddie.

Bik and Brendy ran through the tally lodge to the pedestrian gate, where they arrested the screw who was staffing it. Bik brought him into the tally room where the other screws were being held under guard. Before he was overpowered he managed to hide the keys of the pedestrian gate, so Brendy stood with his foot wedged against the steel door to give the impression to approaching screws that it was locked. He was to admit screws coming on duty and allow them to proceed to the tally lodge, where they would be arrested.

Bobby went to the transport office, arrested the screw there and brought him in for Eddie to guard.

Seán brought the screw he had arrested at the front gate into the tally room. Harry and Jimmy reported that no screws had been found in the vehicle check hut or in the PO's office. The orderly was then taken from the lorry and put under guard in the tally room.

The prisoners now – briefly – had the tally lodge under control. They had planned to be there at the slackest time and for the lorry to leave within a couple of minutes.

On the TV monitor Brendy saw four screws coming on duty. They rapped the door to get in. He took a deep breath, composed himself, rammed the steel chain against the door (to give the impression he had keys) and opened it. They paraded past his pulled-down cap without a second glance and walked straight into the tally lodge where they were taken prisoner and tied up.

Groups of screws appeared on the screen at regular intervals. Brendy went through the same procedure: a quick wipe of sweat from his face, the peak of the cap down over his eyes, a rattle of the chain and open the door. He lost count of how many screws passed him.

Rab tied the hands of the arrested screws, but as the numbers increased it



• DENNIS CUMMINGS

became impossible to tie them all. The operation was developing into one of containing the screws, so instead of tying them, they ordered them to sit on the floor and hold them at gunpoint. Within five minutes there were 30 screws under guard by Rab and Dennis on the floor of the tally room alone. Eddie was arresting screws going off duty and he was assisted at various times by Seán, Harry and Jimmy. Bobby helped Bik arrest the screws coming through the pedestrian gate.

A screw entering the tally lodge was told to lie on the floor. He immediately



• Tally room

tried to draw his baton and was stabbed in the side. Two others behind him, seeing the fracas, also drew their batons. They too were stabbed. All three were immediately put to the floor.

The captured screws were becoming emboldened as their numbers increased. They were shouting and making to get up. Each time they were ordered to stay on the floor. Suddenly one screw, Jimmy Ferris, rose to his feet and made towards an alarm button. He was stabbed and fell to the floor (He later died of a heart attack, which a pathologist found had not been caused by the stabbing.)

Brendy opened the door and let in another three screws, turning his back as they walked towards the tally lodge. When he turned around, one of them was behind him. "Do you want something?" Brendy asked. "I'm your relief," the screw replied. "Give me the keys and away you go."

Off the top of his head Brendy said, "Look, I'm in a bit of bother with the chief, could you go to the tally and let him know that I'll be there in a minute?" "That's your problem, not mine," the screw retorted.

Brendy could smell drink off him so he stepped towards him and said, "Were you drinking?" The screw rambled on about having a few drinks and Brendy cut him off. "If you don't go in and see the chief for me I'm going to let him know that you're drunk." Just then the door of the tally lodge opened and a screw came tumbling out, followed by Rab Kerr with a gun.

The screw at the gate looked from the gun to Brendy in a horror of recognition and he began to scream, "Don't shoot me! Don't shoot me!" He tried to run out through the gate but Brendy grabbed him and pushed him back. He ran again and Brendy punched him. Then to Brendy's astonishment he tried to run through the steel fence. Brendy pulled him away. He had cut his finger slightly and was screaming hysterically.

Bik came out. "Get him into the tally lodge," Brendy said urgently. Bik lifted the screw and carried him in. The British soldier in the lookout post stared down and Brendy wished he was back in his cell.

In the tally lodge they were soon knee deep in screws and it was impossible to be aware of everything that was happening. The sheer numbers in

the place disrupted their communications. They were trying to do several things at once, trying to contain the worsening situation and trying to continue with the escape.

The flow was continuous and instead of being passes and leaving a small tally lodge squad behind as the lorry moved on, all nine were instead involved in arresting screws coming into the tally lodge and guarding them. This was necessary to ensure that the alarm wasn't raised. It was still hoped to capture all screws until there was a break in the flow.

Soon it was impossible to walk from one room to another. To move about they had to climb over the top of the screws. It was an undefendable position. They were surrounded by screws. Rab and Dennis moved into the corridor and took up positions there which protected their back and allowed them to see most of the tally lodge.

Blind spots were covered by other men.

Looking down into the camp, Bobby saw a steady flow of screws coming off duty in twos and threes and he realised a break in their flow was unlikely. In order for the escape to succeed they had to break out of this situation.

Suddenly the phone rang and Bobby ordered complete silence. He grabbed SO Wright, pushed a pistol to his side and told him to answer the phone and not under any circumstances to say anything to indicate there was any problem in the tally lodge. Bobby listened carefully as a screw in the central control room asked what the trouble was. Wright said, "There's no trouble."

"Why has an alarm been sounded, then?"

Wright asked what alarm it was, and the control room said, "The one behind the TV. Now stop carrying on and reset the alarm."

Wright blurted out, "How do you reset it?"

Bobby grabbed him by the shirt and jammed the pistol into his side very firmly.



\* Incoming door of the tally room

just as the caller from the control room replied, "Push it back in, you stupid bastard," and hung up the phone.

Bobby couldn't believe their luck - neither could the SO. He had risked his life for one brief instant and all he got was an idiot on the other end of the phone. He turned deathly pale and was visibly shaken. "No more chances," Bobby told him through gritted teeth.

The situation was quickly becoming impossible. After a brief consultation with Bik, Bobby ordered everyone except Rab, Dennis and Eddie to board the lorry.

Bobby explained to Rab, the tally lodge OC, that they must hold the building for as long as possible to allow the lorry to clear the camp. "Tá brón orm (I'm sorry)," said Bobby. He knew the three men faced certain capture and brutal treatment from the screws. "No problem, mo chara," said Rab, "now go!"

Passes were picked up and Harry and Goose got into the front of the lorry. The escapers believed that if they could get down to the external gate without the alarm

going off, the lorry could still make it out of the camp.

As they were boarding the lorry, the screws coming on duty realised something was wrong and two of them blocked the gateway with their cars. Bik opened the main hydraulic gate slightly and saw the cars blocking it. He called Bobby back out of the lorry. As they assessed the situation, a screw ran from the tally lodge. They knew then that the general alarm was about to go.

In all their planning this was the nightmare they dared not think about. To lose control of the lorry at the tally lodge left them with only one option, to scale the external fence and take to the fields.

They could hear shouting from the tally lodge. Against almost impossible odds, Rab, Dennis and Eddie were still managing

to control the screws. Bobby and Bik quickly agreed that Bobby would go into the tally lodge and try and calm the screws, to give Bik time to get everyone out of the back of the lorry and ready to rush the main gate and the screws outside it.

When Bobby re-entered the tally room, it was chaotic. Rab and Dennis were surrounded by screws on the ground as they stood virtually back-to-back covering the whole room. The screws were building up the courage to rebel, shouting to each other "the guns are dummies" and "they can't shoot us all". Bobby told the screws to calm down, that they were not going to be harmed. "Look, it's over. You've won, we've lost," he said. But it had little effect and actually made the screws more daring. Some shouted, "If it's over, hand over your guns." "We'll decide when to do that," said Bobby.

He was also watching Bik, who now signalled to him that the lads were out of the lorry and were ready.

"Go! Everybody go! Go!" shouted Bobby.

# Capture... and escape

WHEN THE escapers emerged from the lorry, the screws at the front gate momentarily drew back. They had thought there were only about half a dozen men escaping. The waiting crowd of screws from outside the gate then surged forward and the escapers from the lorry had to fight their way through them. This large body of screws then converged on the tally lodge.

#### RAB KERR:

The screws came through the main gate into the airlock and entered the tally lodge to the left of Dennis. They tried to overpower him and in the struggle a shot was discharged. I turned away from the increasingly restless screws. I was guarding and pointed my weapon in the direction of this more immediate danger. As I did this the screws, who were all around my feet, rose up. I was hit with a baton and was carried sideways by the surge of screws getting up. That there were so many in such a confined space saved me, because none of them could get the weapons or the space to do me serious damage.

I didn't fall to the floor immediately, rather I was pushed over on top of other screws and fell in between them and under their feet. They were trying to get up and this further hampered the attacking screws.

As I fell, I flicked on the safety catch of my weapon. When I hit the floor I tried to push it well out of the way. I believed they would execute me if they got our guns and I was trying to delay them in finding mine.

The screws began to regain control of the tally lodge and someone gave the order to get myself, Eddie and Dennis out to the van pool. I was dragged along the corridor and out into the open. By this stage, I was semi-conscious and bleeding heavily. I was face down with a screw standing on my neck, pinning me to the ground under his full weight.

I couldn't move or see anything, apart from screws' feet. It seemed as though they were everywhere and as I lay there I could hear someone screaming. I learned later



• A view of the screws' car park, and behind, the barbed wire fence through which some of the escapers ran

that it was the food lorry orderly – the screws had given him a terrible beating and smashed his teeth in with a baton (he was later to receive a five-figure sum in compensation).

The pressure on my neck was becoming unbearable, but when I tried to move, more pressure was applied. I was turned over and as I lay there looking up, I could see I was completely surrounded by screws. Some held my arms and legs, pulling me in different directions, while others stripped my clothes off. At the same time I was being kicked and punched. Within seconds I was completely naked.

#### BRENDAN MEAD:

I ran out the gate into the screws' car park. I went to a yellow car, opened the driver's door and pulled the screw out. He took the keys out of the ignition and threw them towards a group of screws. By this time, the car was full of our lads. I ran to regain the keys and a group of screws were doing the same. One screw was out in front and he was going to reach me as I bent for the keys, so, while running as fast as I could, I stooped slightly to give the impression of reaching down for the keys. But I ran past them and came up to pound my fist into the running screw's throat. He was knocked on his back. I turned, grabbed the keys and ran like hell back to the car. I got

in, put the window up and locked the door.

The car wouldn't start. I shouted for everyone to shut up. I didn't know what was wrong and my hands searched frantically for a cut-off switch. There was a tap of steel against my window and I turned and saw a gun inches from my face. A screw had picked up one of our weapons and was trying to fire it. I turned my face away. Just at that, the car roared into life and as I accelerated away the screw turned the gun in his hand and smashed the windscreen.

There was an eerie silence in the car as I raced towards the external gate, our last obstacle to escape. A red car driven by a screw overtook us and sped over a ramp beside the Bmt lookout post. As I drove slowly over the ramp, I waited for the Bmt to open up on us. I couldn't understand why he didn't.

I sped towards the second Bmt tower. At the ramp, a Bmt leaned out and looked down at us. I think everyone in the car was expecting to hear the shots but again, nothing. Past the third Bmt tower, no shots. In the distance, I could see the two red and white stop barriers pointing to the sky. This gave me new hope as it indicated there was still confusion among the screws.

The red car skidded to a halt and the screw leapt out shouting and waving. A screw and a Bmt ran to close the gates.

Through them, I could see the hedges and trees in the distance. I immediately put my foot on the accelerator and shouted for everyone to hold on. I closed my eyes and waited for the impact.

I must have been knocked out by the force of the crash, because the next thing I remember was being dragged from the car. A screw had his fist locked in my hair and I begged him to let go. "Please, I'm caught, take my arm." I stretched out my arm to encourage him to take it. "Please let go of my hair, you've caught me. I'll go back with you." "Too right you will, you bastard," he said and went to take my arm. The second I felt his grip loosening, I smashed my fist into his face and he stumbled back. I jumped onto the bonnet of the car which was jammed in the gates and ran as fast as I could towards a housing estate in the distance.

In the car with Brendy were Barry Aru, Jimmy Burns, Jimmy Donnelly, Paul Kane and Jaz McCann. Jimmy Donnelly was wedged in the back seat and couldn't get out of the car. The others managed to scramble out and ran through the partly opened gate.

## JAZ McCANN:

This was one of the strangest experiences I have ever had. I felt that everything around me had stopped moving. It was like a freeze-frame in a film, except that I was the only character moving, and I appeared to be moving in slow motion. As I got further from the car, the sensation gradually wore off.

I broke into a run. It was a fantastic sensation to be out, to be free, to have beaten the system. I didn't care if I was going to be caught at the next bend. I had made it out and I felt that, in itself, was a victory. When I turned round to see if any of the others had made it, I saw screws around the car and two screws and a Brit running after me. This led me to believe I was the only one who had escaped. I was convinced that no one could have made it across the fields and as we drove off from the car park, I thought we were the only ones who could escape. Since I thought I was the only one who got out of the car, I thought the escape was on my shoulders.

I turned left and ran down the Halftown Road. The sentry box could see the right-hand side of the road, so I kept to the left. This prevented me from turning right onto



• JIM 'JAZ' McCANN

Blans Road. I again looked round and saw that the Brit had overtaken the screws and was about 30 yards behind me. He screamed out, "Stop or I'll fire." The excitement in his voice told me that he didn't want to shoot me, but that I was forcing him to do so.

I zigzagged down the road, hoping somehow to avoid his bullets. I knew he had to shoot, I just hoped I wouldn't be hit in the back of the head or on the spinal cord. A shot rang out. It was loud but not that loud, so I thought it had to be in the air. The next shot sent the crack ringing in my ears. My hair stood on end - I was sure he'd hit me with the next one but I had to keep going.

I saw a turn-off to the left (it was the Bog Road). What a Godsend! It gave me something to run for. I ran as hard as I could and I was elated when I made it. But my elation was short-lived. It ran straight

When the Brit reached the turn-off, which was only a matter of seconds away, he would have a clear shot at me. I couldn't get out of his line of fire. Worse, the Bog Road led back along the side of the jail. I could see the visits area on the left-hand side.

I ran to the hedge on the right, with the intention of making it across the fields. But it was a flat, ploughed field, with no cover. It was pointless going in there. I was absolutely exhausted. Breathless, I carried on down the Bog Road. I felt I had to keep going.

Seconds passed, then the Brit appeared at the top of the road and once again called on me to halt. This time I had nothing to run for. Yet, it was very difficult to stop. I couldn't make up my mind what to do. I hadn't the energy to break into a run nor could I bring myself to give up. All I could do was keep walking.

During this period of indecision, the Brit had closed the ground between us. With him only feet away and his gun levelled at me, it became suicidal to continue. So I stopped.

The Brit was very excited and he was shaking. He told me to walk in front of him. At this point, a car stopped at the top of the Bog Road and a screw got out, the one who had initially given chase. He ran towards us. As soon as he reached us, he tried to throw his arm around my neck and put my arm up my back. A scuffle began. There was no way I was leaving any screw bring me back. I could not live with the



• The yellow Toyota car, hijacked by the escaping prisoners, lies jammed in the main gate

# THE GREATEST ESCAPE

IRIS



## • JIMMY BURNS

indignity. I threw him off me and he appealed to the Brit for assistance. The Brit told him to keep out of his line of fire. He still had his gun pointed at my head. The screw didn't try anything after that. The Brit took me back at gunpoint and the screw walked alongside.

## JIMMY BURNS:

I dived out of a side window of the car I saw two screws and a Brit and I shouted at them that I was a prison officer and not to worry, I would go after them. They looked at me as if I wasn't the full shilling and I ran out the front gate after the lads

But it must have put some doubt in their minds because they ran in the opposite direction, after Jaz.

I saw Barry Atti jumping through a gap in a hedge further up the road and I could see Paul Kane and Brendy Mead away in front of me. I ran after them. I saw them hijacking a car and shouted for them to wait for me. But they didn't hear me and as they drove off I was momentarily dejected I had little energy left, my shoes were too big and I still had the screw's overcoat on. The road was empty except for myself.

A couple of cars came along but refused to stop. Then one did stop. There was a man and woman in the front and a child in the back. I opened the passenger door and pushed in beside the woman. I said to the man, "Would you follow behind that car - they've just escaped from the prison." The woman said, "Go ahead John, get after them." But John was having none of it. He stalled the car, pretending it was out of petrol. So I put my hand in my pocket for my pistol. But it wasn't there - I'd dropped it in the crashed car.

John must have been smarter than he looked, because when my hand didn't come out of my pocket, he punched me. I swear his hands were like shovels. He was

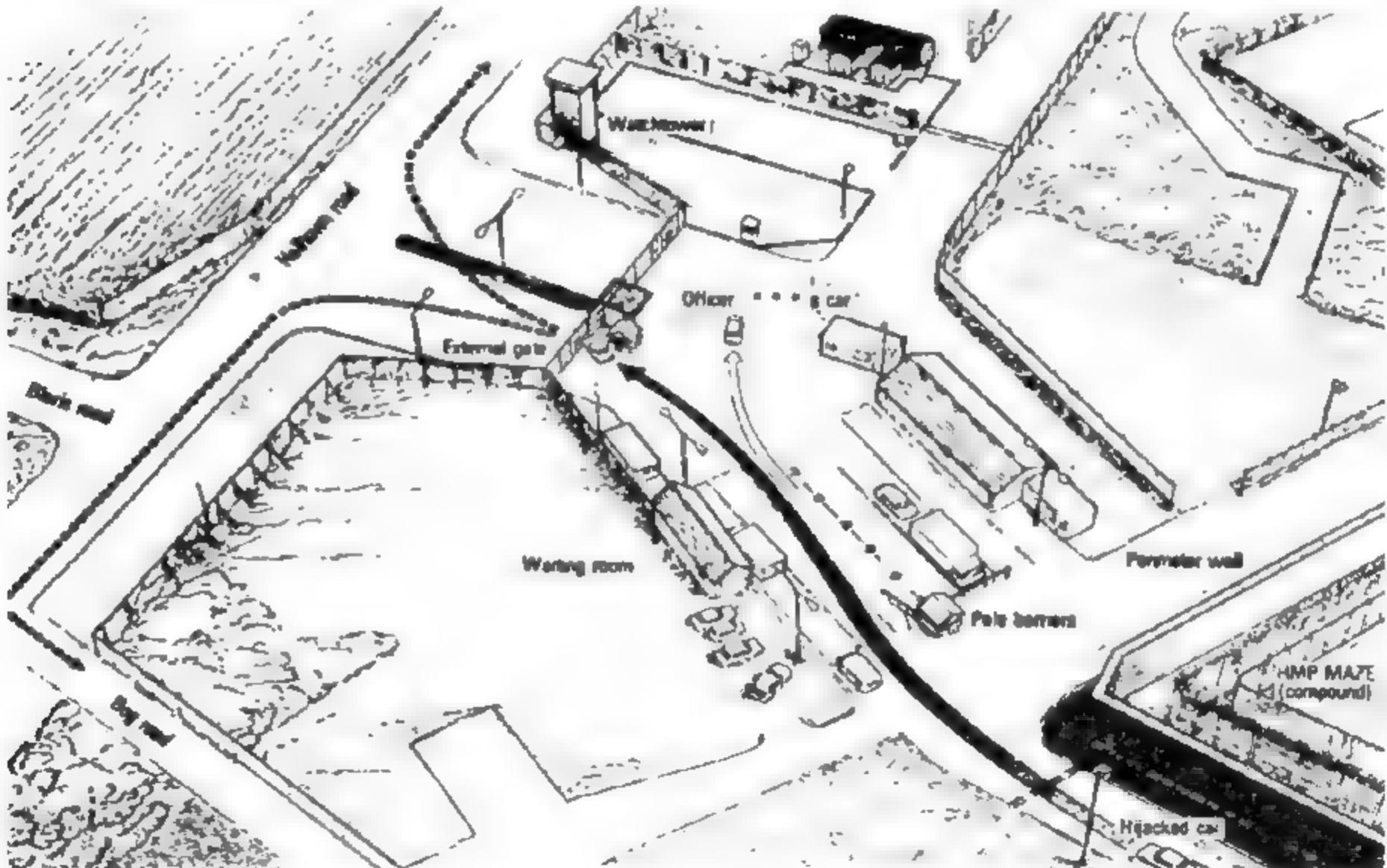
crushing my fingers in my pocket while I was trying to wiggle out the door. I got out but John was still holding on and he kept saying, "You'll not harm my wife." By now, she was holding on to my other arm. The kid in the back was screaming. John was crying and I was cheezeed-off.

I managed to get out of the car and was sorry to do this, but I had to kick John's wife on the shin. He let me go when she screamed.

I ran up the road and as another car passed, I waved it down. It pulled up about 50 yards ahead, but as I ran to it, John and his wife drove up and stopped alongside it. He shouted something and both cars took off at high speed.

I cut through the back gardens of some houses, out through a gap and into a street. A car horn sounded and when I looked around I saw a British Army jeep with him - it's all out on the road. They saw me. I had no choice but to point straight ahead of me and mumble something. I couldn't believe it when they all jumped into the jeep and took off in the direction I was pointing. Needless to say, I went in the opposite direction.

I ran through fields. I was exhausted. I came to a gate and leapt over it, right on



• The route taken by the Toyota towards the main external gate



• RUC officer and British soldiers search cars in the follow-up operation

top of two Alsatian dogs. This might sound like an exaggeration but I'm sure I jumped back over that gate without turning round. They barked loudly and I had to get away fast.

I ended up in a small housing estate. I went to the first house with a car outside it and knocked at the door. I looked pretty rough, so when a guy opened the door I said I'd been mugged and had stuff stolen and would he drive me to an RUC station. He said he couldn't as his wife was taking the car, but he pointed me towards a house where a taxi driver lived. He apologised for not being able to help.

As I walked to the other house, I dusted myself off as best I could. I told the taxi driver that my wife was very ill and that I missed my lift at the prison and would it be possible for him to take me to the hospital as it was very urgent. "No problem," he said.

Off we went and as he turned onto the main road, I could see a lot of activity about 100 yards ahead. I remembered the jeep I had sent in that direction. I knew it was a roadblock, so I said, "Is this Lisburn or Hillsborough we are heading for?" "Lisburn," he replied. "Sorry," I said. "I meant to tell you to go to Hillsborough."

I thought he would pull over but he did a U-turn in the middle of the road about 30 yards from the roadblock. Talk about the hair on the back of my neck standing on end. I was expecting all sorts of shooting to start, but nothing happened.

We had to pass the jail and we drove into a roadblock at the front gate. I was worried, exhausted and disgusted. Two Brits ran over and told us we would have to

go back the way we came. So back we went towards the first roadblock. When we reached it I wound the window down and waved out at the Brits. They must have remembered me from pointing earlier and took me for a real screw because they waved us through.

My spirits picked up. I was sure I would make it. But over the next rise was another roadblock at a crossroads. They didn't seem to be paying much attention to us. I asked the driver to go ahead or we'd be there all day. "We can't move until we're told," he said.

A red-haired RUC officer looked over then ran across to us, screaming at the to get out of the car and pointing his carbine at me. I got out, said I was a prison officer and told him to stop pointing his gun at me. He almost fell for it. He backed off, but then he asked me for my ID. I told him it was in my other coat. He just smiled. He threw me up against the car and began to frisk me. The taxi driver then jumped out. "Leave that officer alone. His wife is very ill and I'm taking him to the hospital," he shouted. So he was put up against the car too.

They took us to the barracks, the taxi driver in the front of the RUC car and me in the back. The taxi driver turned to me. "This is a fine mess you've got me into," he hissed. Even under the circumstances, I had to bite my lip to stop a smile.

**B**arry Art made his way on foot to Belfast, where he made contact with the IRA. Brendy Mead and Paul Kane were soon forced to abandon the car they had hijacked and take to the fields.

They walked for five hours, crossed rivers and struggled through bogland, only to see the light of the jail in the distance. They had circled back to near where they had left the car. Dejected, they turned around and began walking again.

A few hours later, exhausted, they hid under bushes and slept. Just before dawn they moved on, hoping to reach a nationalist area. Eventually, they saw a slogan painted on a wall: "Up the IRA". They were in Castlewlan and decided to make contact with local republicans. But as they approached a house, two RUC officers saw them. They were recaptured.

Harry Murray had run out into the screws' car park just behind Brendy.

## HARRY MURRAY:

When I ran through the gate there were a lot of screws milling about. The rest of the lads were right behind me and the screws fell back when they saw us. I had no real plan, I just covered the lads in case the screws tried to grab any of them.

I saw Brendy Mead flatten a screw, bend down and pick something off the ground and then run towards a car. The screws surrounded it and one of them banged the side window. I decided if he broke it and grabbed the driver, I was going to shoot him. I was leaning on the car roof pointing my gun at the screws, when suddenly the car sped off, leaving me to face the crowd of screws. I turned and ran like hell towards the wire.

Bobby Storey and Billy Gorman were trying to climb over but Billy's coat was snagged. Twenty screws came charging towards us. Bobby managed to get over, while I was trying to free Billy. I turned



• Harry Murray

# THE GREATEST ESCAPE

IRIS

around and a screw was aiming a gun at my head. I raised my gun and told him to drop his. He told me to drop mine first – so I did and shot him in the thigh.

I then swung the weapon round to the rest of the screws and the scene was like something from a Charlie Chaplin film – they were covering their heads with their arms, trying to duck and running into each other.

I told Billy to get over the wire and then jumped over myself. Billy's leg was caught and as I freed it, the screws were throwing rubble at us. I ran up the hill, turned and saw that Billy was lying at the wire covered by a screw with a gun. I ran on and about five yards from the top, I felt a dull thump in my thigh. The next thing I knew I was looking up at the sky and my gun was lying a few feet away. I didn't realise what had happened until I turned and saw my foot lying on my shoulder. I knew then I had been shot, although I hadn't felt much pain.

I felt myself going numb and pretty soon the screws were on top of me. They trailed me down the hill and let out a yell from the pain in my leg – one of them said, "Listen to him," so I said to myself, no more, and just gritted my teeth. They punched and kicked me and some were screaming, "Turncoat bastard!" (I was raised a Protestant in the loyalist Tiger's Bay area of Belfast.) This went on and on and all I wished for was a wee bit of energy so I could grab one of them, sink my teeth into his leg and not let go.

I was taken to Lagan Valley Hospital. On a stretcher alongside mine was the screw I had shot. We traded insults. He threatened what he would do to me when I got back to the jail. I leaned over and told him he was only a slabber, before flopping back down on my stretcher.

I heard the screws tell a nurse that, despite my uniform, I was only a prisoner and she replied, "If I had known that, I'd have left him lying there for a week." Whatever happened to Florence Nightingale?

## BILLY GORMAN:

I noticed a crowd of screws running towards the wounded screw and myself. Realising what would happen when they got their hands on me, I tore frantically at the wire in a bid to free myself – but I succeeded only in becoming further entangled. At first, the screws wouldn't come near me



• PETER HAMILTON

because the wounded screw's gun was lying nearby. Once they saw there was no threat, however, they were on top of me.

They gave me a kicking and dragged me across the car park back into the jail, where I was stripped and spread-eagled on the ground. Nearby, I saw Rab, Eddie, Dennis and the orderly from the food lorry.

The screws were going wild as reports came in from H7. Every now and again a screw would tell of some incident that had happened and that would be the cue for

them to lay into us again. At one point, they were almost fighting among themselves (one or two screws were trying to calm things down but the rest accused them of being "provie lovers").

## RAB KERR:

After some time the screws were instructed to take us to the boards (the punishment block) and I heard a van being backed over to where I was lying face down on the ground. I was lifted by the arms and legs and thrown headfirst into the van, which had a bench seat down each side of it.

I was vaguely conscious of another body lying on the narrow floor between the seats. There were four screws sitting in the van and they rested their feet on top of me, thus ensuring that I couldn't move. After a minute or two another body, then another was thrown in and I was buried beneath them. The van was then driven to the boards.

At the boards, the back door of the van was opened and the screws took us out one by one. As they pulled me, still in a dazed state, my head first hit the floor of the van, then the back of it, before landing on the

stoney ground. I was picked up by two screws, one on each side of me, and run down to the cells. They smashed first one shoulder into a door and then the other into the next one, and so on, until finally I reached the cell. Once I was there the assaults stopped.

The cells were empty except for bedding. The water containers had been removed and we were denied water until the following day. I had no idea how successful the escape had been. All I knew was that there were others on the boards. For hours afterwards, I could hear men being beaten as they were brought to the cells. Some of us got up to our doors and shouted to each other in order to establish how many of us were there, but after a short while, I became too dizzy and had to lie down. Our only way of gauging our success was by listening to the helicopters which were flying around the camp, because we believed that as long as they were in the air, some of our men were away.

## EDDIE O'CONNOR:

I came to the boards, lying naked on the floor of a locked cell. For a few seconds the shouting I heard seemed far off in the distance, then I realised it was the other lads trying to contact me. I got to the door and tried to answer, but my speech was incoherent and I couldn't be understood, so I banged the door and grunted in response to their questions.

The sense of elation was electrifying and our morale was sky-high, especially when we heard that 27 had got away.

In total, 29 escapees ran to the barbed wire. Twenty-seven made it over the top of the hill down a 30-foot gully and up the other side. From there, they could see farmhouses.

## PETER HAMILTON:

I got up the hill beside Gary Roberts and I ran across two fields. I was hammered, legs sore, chest burning and I just kept going. I saw a farmhouse about 100 yards away and it was like the Promised Land. I came out on a small dirt road and saw Sean McGlinchey, Joe Simpson and Bobby Storey, but guess what? There wasn't a car in sight – we must have hit upon the poorest farmer in Ireland.

We decided to go into another field and get dug in until night time. But there was

no cover, the field was like a snooker table. There was a river running beside it and as we were about to cross it a helicopter flew by. We got into the water and hid under the bank. Very soon RUC, military police and screws came running along the far bank looking for us. We could hear them mentioning our names. Eventually, we were spotted and told to come out. As I emerged, one of the RUC officers fired a shot. 'We're unarmed, you bastard,' I shouted. I was looking right at him from about nine feet and I saw at once that he wasn't operating on all batteries. His mate turned around and told him to cool down. I reckoned the only reason they all didn't open up was that there was too much of a mixture - screws, RUC and military police - they couldn't trust each other not to open their mouths sometime.

#### BOBBY STOREY:

Subsequently, the four of us - myself, Peter, Joe and Seán - were put on the ground beside the river. They stripped us, cuffed our hands behind our backs and kicked and punched us. We were frog-marched to a nearby bridge and beaten as we went. There I was spread-eagled against the bridge railings and questioned. When I remained silent, I had my eye split open with a blow from a gun. A military police officer placed the muzzle of his machine gun between my legs and repeatedly pulled it up sharply into my genitals, trying to rip me open. Beside me, the others were being beaten. Joe's head was busted open and bleeding heavily.

A jeep arrived to take us back to the jail and any hopes I had for a temporary respite were soon dashed when RUC officers alighted whooping and yelling abuse at us. In the jeep, one RUC officer held me against its side with a rifle to my neck as another, in a frenzy, was hitting me with his rifle. At one point, he pulled the trigger by accident. It clicked - obviously the breech was empty. The rifle had been pointed at another RUC officer and they began to argue, grappling with each other.

The jeep stopped at the main gate and they kicked me out into a mob of screws. Some of them tried to get me over to the car park, while others tried to pull me back into the jail. I was eventually pulled into the jail through the pedestrian gate. The mob was locked out and I was along with four or five screws. They attacked me, one of them using a baton. They were getting in



each other's way, so two held my arms against a wire fence while a third methodically punched my ribs.

I was then dragged through the tally lodge and into the van pool. It was packed with screws and I was attacked again. I curled up into a ball. I was bordering on unconsciousness at this stage, though I recall at one point a screw shouting at them not to use batons on me.

When things eventually calmed down a screw came over and sat on me. He seemed in a daze, crying and mumbling to himself. It was as though he was oblivious to me.

At one point his hand was gripping my face, then he let go and got up and walked off. He seemed completely lost and bewildered.

Two screws were then ordered to take me to the reception building. They each took an arm and half-ran, half-dragged me.

The four of us had received similar treatment and were almost beyond feeling then. I passed Peter Hamilton as I entered reception. He was on the ground outside being kicked by screws. Once inside, I was put in a four foot square cubicle. The door opened twice and screws assaulted me. The second time I was left dazed on the floor.

I was then dragged out and thrown into a van with Peter. We were still naked. The van drove to the boards, where we were dragged out by our ankles. Four screws trailed us along rough ground, scraping the skin off our backs and buttocks. They

dragged us up the steps and threw us into the cells.

**G**ary Robens made his way on foot outside the inner ring of roadblocks and search parties near the jail. For a few hours he lay concealed in the countryside, then tried to make his way to Belfast. It was a foggy night and he hoped that would help him avoid capture. But as he crossed a field, a British Army patrol emerged from the darkness and spotted him.

Gary was handed over to the RUC at a nearby roadblock. He was badly beaten by them and again by screws when he returned to the jail.

Bik McFarlane was among a large group who ran towards one farmhouse.

#### BIK McFARLANE:

I bounded over a fence and turned left towards a main road, when suddenly a blue car trundled out of a farm laneway. There were twelve of the lads jammed into it. Spanner Campbell was behind the wheel and I saw Goose Russell with both legs hanging out the door. Spanner slowed to let me in and someone from the tangle of bodies shouted, 'Come on Bik, get in!' There was no way that car would have restarted if Spanner stopped and there was simply no room. So I told him to drive on. Someone else shouted back that there was another car up in the farmyard.

I raced up the laneway to discover a Volkswagen van and a large Mercedes saloon. I couldn't believe my luck. Gerry 'Blute' McDonnell had arrived in front of me and we rushed into the farmhouse demanding the keys of the car. A young lad handed them over and we jumped into the Mercedes.

By now, eight others were in the yard. Marcus Murray and Marty McManus opted for the vans while into the car with us piled the other six - Séamus McElwaine, Jim Clarke, Terry Kirby, Paul Brennan, Tony McAllister and Dermot 'Oda' McNally.

**M**arcus Murray and Marty McManus drove the Volkswagen van at breakneck speed along the narrow country roads. Eventually, they came to the main Belfast-Dublin dual carriageway and turned onto it. They thought about ditching the van but, worried

that an abandoned vehicle would soon be spotted, they drove on.

Their luck ran out north of Banbridge, when they came upon a roadblock. They were arrested and handed over to the RUC

## GERRY KELLY:

There were twelve of us in the car and we set off sluggishly. We decided to stick to minor roads. We came across a fella talking to two girls. Beside him was a car with Turbo written on it. Spanner Campbell, Goose Russell and Rinty Fryers jumped out - I tried to follow them but I was jammed in. They took the car and flew off up the hill, leaving us well behind.

After a short while, our old Coruna packed up - the clutch was burned out - so Dermny Finucane and I ran back to a house we had just passed to try to get a car. I was cut and bleeding and my clothes were ripped, so we decided to pretend we had just had an accident. Just then, a car came over the hill and Dermny dropped to the ground and played dead. I staggered to the side of the road. The car stopped about 50 yards from us. As I staggered on, it reversed a few yards towards us and I raised an imploring hand, moaning and groaning at the same time.

A middle-aged woman was driving, with a man in the passenger seat. I fell, then dragged myself up to the car. "Please," I said, "get the police, get me to the hospital. Help my mate." The man's heart softened, but he wouldn't leave the car. "OK, lad, come on," he said, "we'll get you to hospital, come on."

"My mate's hurt too," I said. "Never mind him," he replied, "we'll get you first." He opened the door and pulled the front passenger seat forward. I jumped straight in and grabbed the woman driver round the neck. At the same time Dermny had made a miraculous recovery and sprinted to the driver's door. In a second, the woman and man were standing on the road and we drove off.

We drove back towards the dead Coruna and the seven lads appeared out of the ditch and jumped into our car. It was another tight fit and I ended up with my head stuck through the sun roof. I could see cars at a garage in the distance and told Dermny to drive there. I was shouting directions and I felt like Oddball in Kelly's Heroes.

When we reached the garage, we saw a large car with a big, burly lad at it. "Right,

out and get that one," I said. Five of the lads got out and ran to him, while Dermny drove to the exit and waited. But the big lad was fighting them off like a Trojan, until one of them produced a screw's baton. But he then threw his keys away, so the lads ran back and clambered into the car. (I later learned that the big lad was a nationalist who may well have given them the car if they had said who they were.)

We drove on until we spotted two cars parked on the hard shoulder. We blocked the path of the front one. Four of the lads got out and ordered the woman driver out. In our car was Cleaky Clarke, Dermny Finucane, Hush-Hush (Kieran Fleming), Pádraig McKeamey and myself. In the woman's car were Paddy McIntyre, Joe Corey, Jim Smyth and Spasser Kelly. We decided to split up, so at the next cross-roads we turned left and they turned right.

**P**addy, Joe, Jim and Spasser drove south into County Down. There were heavy raids in the area and on Tuesday evening, Joe and Paddy were recaptured near Castlewellan. Jim and Spasser, however, were more fortunate. They were the first escapers to make it across the border.

## GERRY KELLY:

We drove until we came to a signpost for a nationalist area. One advantage of jail is that there are prisoners from every area of the North and we all knew names of ex-prisoners and street names from every nationalist area.

Two British Army jeeps passed us, presumably on their way to Long Kesh. Hush-Hush spotted a street sign he recognised, so we drove into the street and stopped at a small shop. Pádraig jumped out and went in. Three girls passed and we tried to get information from them about local republicans but they became frightened and ran off.

Pádraig emerged with a woman who was giving him directions. He convinced her to get in with us but she refused point-blank. I asked her did she know any ex-prisoners living locally and she rhymed off a list of them. I recognised one and said, "He'll do." There were a few youngsters standing nearby and as she was giving me directions one young lad on a bike said, "That's my brother, follow me."

We followed the bike to a house. The front door was open, so I walked straight

in. His brother was sitting watching television. I shouted his jail nickname and he jumped out of his chair and spun round, moving backwards. He didn't recognise me. "It's me, Gerry Kelly," I said, "we've just escaped from the Kesh and we need your help."

He was finding it hard to take in. "Jesus, how did you do it? How many is there?" he asked. "It's a long story," I said, "but about 40 of us are out and five of us have reached here. Half the area must have seen us, so we can expect the Brits. We need you to get us away and into a safe house."

I tried to keep it calm but it was still a bombshell to him. He was no longer in the IRA but he was sound, bringing us to another house discreetly, in the back door. Dermny had parked the car some distance away. I spoke with the ex-prisoner and mentioned a comrade we both knew and who was in charge of the IRA locally. I told him to find him and bring him back to us. I asked him to be very quick as we expected heavy raids, especially if the Brits in the jeeps we had passed earlier had thought us suspicious.

Twenty minutes later - it seemed like hours - he returned with the man I had sent him for (we will call him Conor) along with another Volunteer. After much laughing, handshakes and back slapping we got down to business.

By an amazing coincidence, our three comrades in the Turbo had arrived at the same wee shop where we had met the youngster on the bike. Conor told us they were safe in another part of the town. He left and said he would be back in fifteen minutes.

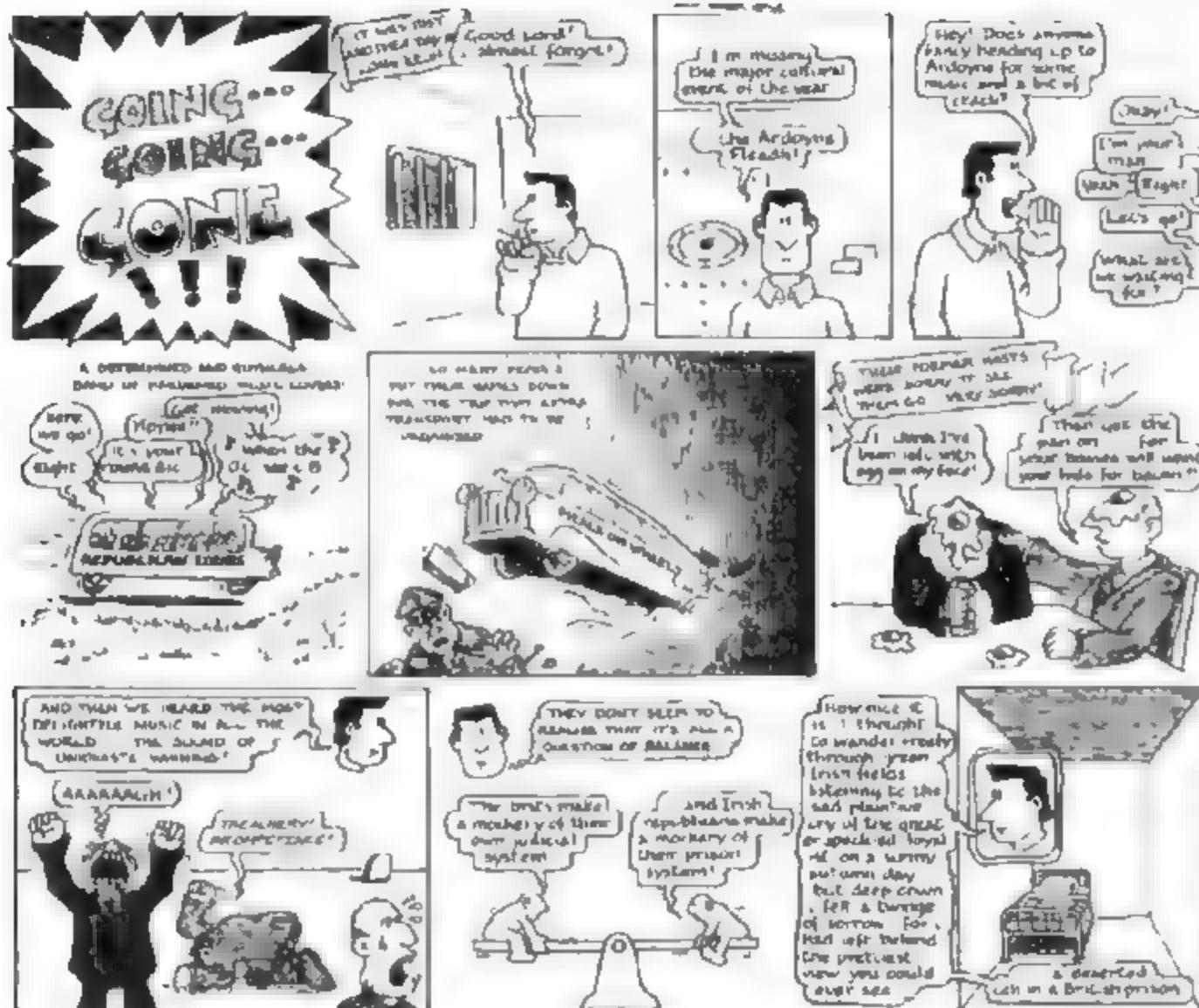
He gave the keys of our car to the Volunteer, who then drove along back roads to Newry - an excellent ruse that must have convinced the enemy that we had crossed the border. Conor and his unit disposed of the Turbo, cutting it into miniature pieces and making it disappear off the face of the earth. These moves did much to guarantee our subsequent safety.

Conor returned after ten minutes. He had a van parked nearby and we were taken to it a couple at a time and driven to a house in a different district. We sat down to a meal and discussed our situation with Conor.

He said we had two options. We could spread out over a number of safe houses or we could go to one house which had a hide under the floor, big enough to hold all of

# THE GREATEST ESCAPE

**IRIS**



us. We listened to all the things he told us about the house with the hide and decided to go for it. We knew that searches would be intense and this seemed the best option. Also, we knew the circumstances wouldn't allow the leadership to make contact with us for a few days and when they did, security would be best served if they didn't have to troop around different houses.

We moved out to the house at dusk. This time, for reasons of security, only Conor was aware of our exact destination. The Volunteer led us, one at a time, to the general area. Conor was standing near the house and as we passed him he surreptitiously indicated where we were to go. All this was arranged beforehand.

When I arrived, Spanner, Goose and Rinty were in the sitting room. When the rest arrived, all eight of us went into the hide immediately. Lying flat, we made ourselves as comfortable as we could. We had flashlights and after a couple of hours, we got sleeping bags, blankets and a watch. We also got a radio with an earplug, so right away we tuned into reports of the escape and the hunt for those of us who got away.

Because Hush-Hush's broken arm was very painful and uncomfortable, he lay next to the hide entrance, which allowed

him a little more room. We hadn't room to sit up, so eating was a problem. Food was cooked to suit - thick soups and stew, eaten out of paper cups, and sandwiches. The people of the house cooked pies, cakes and special treats for us - where they found out our particular likes, they baked to them. They were brilliant people in every way and, of course, very brave. The psychological pressure must have been immense and they will never be forgotten by the men who spent those two weeks under their floor.

In the first few days we went up in pairs to get cleaned up but after that we only left the hide to empty our bowels. To urinate in, we had a bucket with an airtight lid, which was emptied daily.

A problem arose – in a packed, confined space with a urine bucket and our own dirt and sweat, a smell was developing. Maybe it wasn't apparent to people but it certainly was to dogs. One began to sniff around the air vent in the wall of the house and the people had to use dog repellent.

We kept conversation to a minimum and then only in whispers. It was hard having to stay quiet for such a long time, but we managed.

When an Army Council representative finally arrived, I went up into the living

room to discuss our plans to move. To cut down the risks, it was decided that we would be moved closer to the border, two at a time. Once the plans had been finalised, we grew a bit restless but the time eventually came for our departure.

It was arranged that I was to leave with Derny. The first thing we noticed on emerging from the hide was that our balance was awry - it took a while to get used to standing and walking again. Goose gave me a haircut and we both cleaned ourselves up.

We were led first to another safe house and then set off by car to make a rendezvous. Derry and I were tense and we kept our eyes on the road. I held onto the door handle in case we had to jump out - we knew the ditches were our best chance if we hit trouble. It was getting dark and we were travelling through staunch loyalist

coming through scattered loyalist country when I noticed two military jeeps coming down a road which joined ours at an acute angle.

The first jeep pulled out smoothly in front of us and the second drove in behind us. My reaction was an involuntary "Shut!" I thought three men in a car must have looked out of place. I leaned over to the driver: "Slow down slightly, just enough to let the jeep in front get some distance ahead and maybe he'll overtake us." Then I added, perhaps a little melodramatically, "If they want you to stop don't do it, because the only way we are giving up is if a rifle is stuck down my throat." That grand statement was never tested — the second jeep overtook us and we made it to the rendezvous. There we met another ASU and transferred to their cars.

Later we crossed the border. After a long drive we were put in the care of another ASU who placed us in safe houses. Wherever we went, the people looked after us like kings.

RIK McFARLANE

We were elated as we drove off in the Mercedes down the lane and onto the narrow road. We soon turned left onto the main road, but we didn't know where we were nor what direction to take.



• The McFarlane home in Dromore, where eight of the escapees hid while the search for them continued

We drove for a few minutes and then decided to ask directions to the Moura roundabout. The people we spoke to weren't too clear about their directions, but we managed to get onto a dual carriageway and sped along for some minutes. A couple of UDR jeeps passed in the opposite direction.

With no signposts appearing, I began to feel a little anxious about cruising along such a main route. There were bound to be roadblocks going up on all the main roads, especially this one. I asked Séamus McElwaine what he felt we should do. With the exception of Séamus and Jim, everyone else was from an urban area - five were from Belfast while Oda was from Lurgan - with no experience of operating in the country.

Séamus had a wealth of experience and I was delighted that he was with us. He said we ought to get rid of the car as soon as possible, bury it in thick bushes and take to the fields, or else get into a house and wait for darkness to fall. Either way, we had to conceal the car. Helicopters would spot a bright green Merc a mile away.

I pulled off the dual carriageway at the first chance and turned into a narrow, winding country road. I asked Séamus to keep an eye out for a suitable house we could take and told the lads to watch everything as we motored along.

As we came up a small hill, Séamus spotted a house to the left. I braked and checked behind. The road was deserted and the nearest house was some distance away, at the top of the next rise. I handed over the

pistol to one of the lads and told six of them to get out and take the house while I reversed up the road. Oda stayed in the car with me, watching to the front in case any one spotted us. I reversed past the gateway and then drove in and parked beside the family car.

Oda and I dashed into the house where we found the lads holding the family - a mother and father, two sons of eleven and 12 and a baby. From the kitchen, a door led into a spacious garage-cum-workshop. Oda and I cleared a workbench out of the way and pushed a large fridge tight against the rear wall. We opened the up-and-over door and I drove the Mercedes in. It was perfect. With the door closed we had, to all intents and purposes, disappeared from the face of the earth.

I sat down in the car and just relaxed. I hoped that everyone else had had as much good fortune as ourselves. All we needed now was to settle in for a few hours and prepare ourselves for a very long walk in the dark to the border. If we were careful, we would enjoy a lot more of this freedom.

Coincidentally, the family whose home we had invaded bore the same name as myself. They were extremely shaken and, understandably, very nervous and frightened. We assured them that no harm would come to them and we tried to convince them that our sole purpose in taking over their home was to avoid capture.

After checking the house, we positioned men at vantage points upstairs which had a clear view up and down the road and to the rear across fields. We then settled down to

plan our route to the border. We decided on the shortest route which was directly towards South Armagh (although this was probably the most dangerous because it would appear the most obvious). Aided by a small map and compass we had obtained from the family, we plotted a course through staunch unionist farmlands.

From questioning Mrs McFarlane, we established our precise location and directions to nearby towns. I was a bit surprised to discover that we were not more than three or four miles from the camp. I felt we were safe enough for the moment but we would need to tread cautiously when we took

to the fields.

We learned that a friend of Mr McFarlane's was to call at about 6.00pm to collect some paperwork he had been working on when we had stormed into his house. He was instructed to complete the work and not to include any subtle references to being in trouble. His work was checked when he finished and we decided that Mrs McFarlane would hand it over when the caller arrived and explain that her husband was not at home. We didn't want him to be invited in.

We positioned men to prevent any mishaps, intentional or otherwise. One man took up position in a small shed just inside the front gateway, while two of us concealed ourselves behind the doorway of the small porch.

It was after 6.30pm when the visitor's car pulled into the gravel driveway. Mrs McFarlane appeared nervous (although a lot calmer than when we had first burst in) as we motioned her towards the door. When she opened it, she was greeted by a rather excited man who couldn't wait to relate his experience of having been stopped at roadblocks six times on his way out of Belfast.

He was glad, he said, to have got off the main roads and onto this small country road free of activity. He asked if she had heard about the big escape and remarked how incredible it was. On receiving the paperwork, he thanked her and said he would have to dash as he knew it would take him ages to get home with all the 'security' activity. Off he sped as quickly

as he had arrived. We were very relieved because the last thing we needed was a captive who would definitely be missed within a couple of hours.

We settled down to watch TV news reports and listen to radio bulletins. Some of the lads gathered up supplies of food and bottles of water for the trek. We took some heavy clothing, anoraks and sweaters, a portable radio, a couple of haversacks and a small bedside clock. I made a list of all items, signed the bottom and handed it to Mrs McFarlane. I explained that if she wanted, it would be possible to be compensated for the items we had taken.

One major problem remained unresolved. When it came time to leave, how could we be sure they wouldn't run immediately to a neighbour and phone the RUC? We wouldn't get two miles away if that happened. We couldn't tie them up - it was out of the question with children in the house - and I didn't dare select someone to remain behind for a number of days and then organise transport to call back for him.

It was decided to try to secure a commitment from the family not to inform the RUC for a specified period of time. Blute and Séamus were tasked with obtaining a guarantee. Before they spoke with Mrs McFarlane, I called her aside and explained that we had a dilemma. I pointed out that it was our earnest wish to be gone as soon as possible and with the least amount of fuss. But our difficulty was that they would be free to alert the RUC immediately.

I told her that I had only two courses open to me. One was to leave someone behind, which I preferred not to do. The second was to bring the older of her two sons with us part of the way and release him at a safe location. There was a look of anguish on her face at even the thought of it and she pleaded with me not to do that.

I suggested that she discuss with Blute and Séamus an alternative which would leave us all in a comfortable position. She hurried off to another room to talk with them.

Her husband, meanwhile, was still sitting nervously in the living room. He had smoked the last of his cigarettes and was by now well into the lads' rollups but they didn't have much of a calming effect. His wife, on the other hand, had settled well and appeared calm and relaxed within an hour of our arrival. She seemed a strong,

level-headed woman, who sensed at an early stage that no harm was intended to her family.

Her two sons also relaxed quickly and were very soon talking with some of the lads about sports, school and hobbies. At one stage they asked if they could watch TV in the sitting room with Jim, Terry and Paul. I don't think she was keen on the idea, but five minutes later there was a rush to get the best seat on the sofa in front of the TV.

I waited for Blute or Séamus to let me know what the outcome of their conversation had been. There was never any intention of taking her son with us - it would have been madness - but it was a lever which could possibly gain us precious hours if she guaranteed a delay in contacting the RUC. Blute emerged and, with a smile on his face, informed me that we had 72 hours' grace. I couldn't believe we had got that long.

But how could we be absolutely certain? The short answer was, we couldn't. Blute pointed out, however, that they were a devout Christian family and that we should ask them to confirm the agreement by swearing on the Bible. Mrs McFarlane agreed to this. I think she felt it would convince us that she was genuine.

When they all had sworn on the Bible, she asked me directly if I would give her my word that I wouldn't take her son with

us. I told her that she no longer need worry. She looked very relieved and thanked me and I wondered how she could so quickly accept the word of someone who had turned a quiet family Sunday into a harrowing experience.

It was after 10.30pm when we set off into the darkness. The McFarlane family had chosen to stay in one bedroom together at 10.00pm and weren't aware of our departure. With faces blackened and all light-coloured clothing turned inside out, we headed briskly and silently down the road in single file. Séamus took the lead, Blute the rear. Instructions to the men were simple. At any sound or sight of traffic, each man was to jump straight into the ditch beside him and keep his head down - there would be no talking and any problems would be relayed along the line in whispers.

We were each separated by a few yards and moved fast along the side of the road, gravel crunching underfoot, disturbing the silence. It was dangerous to stay on the road but we needed to cover at least three miles to reach a turn-off point, from where we would head due south. Then we could take to the safety of the fields. A number of times we had to dive into ditches, the branches and brambles tearing at our hands and faces.

In the distance we could just hear the distinctive drone of a Brit chopper. It was



\* The River Bann which the escapers came to north of Gilford

n't possible to see the searchlight, but it was surely scanning great swathes of countryside. We would have to bury ourselves under a hedgerow if it came our way.

As we marched on, a mist suddenly descended and thickened by the minute. Visibility at times was no more than 50 yards. Then we realised how silent it had become – the searcher in the sky had been forced to admit defeat. There was an even greater lightness in our step now. Good fortune was still with us.

I was delighted when we emerged from the cover of overhanging trees at the end of a side road and spotted a road sign with directions to Belfast and Lurgan. We crossed the main road quietly and swiftly, scaled a fence and tramped across the first field. A quick check of our small clock showed that it wasn't yet 1.00am. We had a good four hours' slog ahead of us.

The mist lifted and revealed a starry sky. Paul spotted the Plough and the Pole Star and suggested that we check our compass to see if we had a true reading. Sure enough, it was spot on.

The following hours were uneventful but very tiring. At about 5.00am we looked for a suitable place to dig in for the day. We would travel only by night. We chose an overgrown section between two large fields and made ourselves comfortable and secure under bushes. The weather was very mild and everyone soon dozed off for a few hours' welcome slumber.

Throughout the day we listened to the radio. It seemed the entire country was out searching for us – Brits, UDR, RUC, reservists, unionist farmers, the lot. And the Free Staters were outdoing all of them, by threatening to hand us back and us not even caught yet.

It was a terrific sensation lying out in fields – tired, hungry and anxious but tasting freedom in the midst of all that greenery. It was calm and peaceful with hardly a breeze. At lunchtime, the stillness was disturbed by two farmers and a dog who skirted the large field, but the dog detected nothing. They passed by and we settled down again to await nightfall.

At 8.00pm we set off across wide open fields. We replenished our water bottles in a cattle trough and ate the last of our rations. Hopefully, the night's trek would see us well on our way – there were a good nine hours ahead and if all the countryside was as favourable as these open fields we would cover a good distance.



• The main road leading out of Gilford

But we hadn't gone for more than two hours when Tony McAllister went over on his ankle and sprained it badly. It swelled up and we had to lay him down for a while. To complicate matters, he suffered from an ulcer and without tablets to ease the discomfort he looked pretty miserable. The need to help him walk slowed our progress.

Our luck took a further nosedive when we reached Gilford around 1.00am. We had to bypass the town, but we were in an area bounded on the right by the main road which was lit up like a fairground and on the left by an ominous-looking river. We couldn't risk crossing it in the dark because we didn't know how deep it was and not everyone could swim. So we opted to find a path through a large private demesne.

We fumbled around in the dark for an hour or so and, making little headway, we filled our haversacks and stomachs with small crab apples and looked for a comfortable spot to bed down. We came upon a sloping lawn at the top of which was a large greenhouse.

Opposite a large open gateway was a cluster of evergreen trees and bushes, their branches sweeping down to the very edge of the lawn. We crawled underneath and found a sheltered patch where we quickly made beds of leaves. We took it in turns to sleep, draping all the jackets over the couple of men dozing. We were all weary and I was annoyed at not having passed this town. It was four hours' walking time lost.

The morning rolled quietly in. Then, shortly before 11.00am, we were alerted by

the 'country squire' and his wife arriving. They went towards the greenhouse out of view to our right. The woman left in a car a couple of hours later.

At about 3.00pm the 'squire', with two dogs jumping playfully around him, walked down the lawn directly toward our hiding place. The dogs stopped suddenly and barked ferociously towards us. The 'squire' shouted at them a few times and then disappeared down a pathway and was gone. We relaxed again and wished for 8.00pm.

In less than half an hour, a car drew up in front of the gateway. At first, I thought it was the woman returning, but I nearly had heart failure when I spotted the unmistakable green of an RUC uniform. Then two others emerged from the car. By now, all the lads had spotted them and began to shift beside me, ready to bolt at the first sight of any of them approaching our hide.

I whispered to be quiet and quickly pulled on my shoes. No one stirred. Then a faint whisper in my ear, "Let's get out of here." But we didn't dare move a muscle. One of the RUC officers moved onto the lawn, while the others walked off along the path. I looked at my .25 pistol with its silencer and almost sighed with despair. It would be of use only if he stuck his head through the bushes – we could grab him and threaten to shoot him if he yelled out. Other than that we'd have to hightail it across the fields.

We watched as he looked up and down the lawn and across at the trees that con-

cealed us. He appeared very calm and unconcerned. Obviously the 'squire' had phoned the barracks and I could only hope that the local peelers, cheesed off with constant calls about kids trespassing and robbing his orchard, were simply showing their faces out of courtesy.

Suddenly, the two RUC officers returned and beckoned the other into the car. It rolled off slowly down the path. All around me, audible groans were emitted and pulse rates dropped again. I couldn't believe our luck.

Séamus spoke immediately. "Right, we're out of here now." We crawled to the edge of a field which sloped steeply down, rolled over a wire fence and slid down towards a pathway. From there, we slipped down a steep bank to the river. The water roared up at us as we scurried along through the trees and undergrowth.

I noticed a couple of fishermen below, wrapped up in their art. Further along, we descended to a narrow path and sat back into the growth beside it. There were lots of berries which provided a welcome feast as we waited for dusk. We had arrived at an excellent point where we could cross the river.

But just as we were settling, two young lads with fishing rods came along the bank and almost bumped into Blute and Jim. The kids climbed off the path and headed off. We didn't know if they had seen us, so we decided to move on. It was 3.45pm.

Into the river we went, in single file. The water was chilly but didn't quite reach chest height. We were quickly across and helped each other scramble up the far bank and into the bushes. We pushed on up the slope and sheltered among some large firs to dry out.

We had managed to reach this spot without anyone having seen us, we hoped. We lay there looking down at a T-junction, jealous of the people in the cars that slowed and turned.

We made reasonable progress that evening, but approaching midnight, a mixture of cold, hunger and ailments forced us to consider taking over a farmhouse. We passed one close to the roadside and when no dogs appeared we crept up to listen at the windows. There were visitors in the house, so we would have to wait until they left. Most of the lads hid in an adjacent field, while Séamus and I moved across the road and in behind a gate.

Sitting there for half an hour was time

enough to bring us to our senses. Taking a house so far from the border would only alert the enemy to our exact location after we'd left and we couldn't be sure of the occupants staying silent. So we gathered up the lads and headed off again.

It was slow and tiring and by now we were ravenous. We bedded down high on a hill covered in whin bushes at around 6.00am on Wednesday, huddled together for warmth. I felt exhausted and grabbed whatever sleep I could. Later in the morning we watched a farmer in a field carry hay to some cattle. Everything was silent apart from a light cool breeze. The weather had been kind to us.

The compass pointed us in the direction of County Louth and we set off again. The previous night, we had chanced a couple of hours walking along minor roads well after midnight and had made fair progress. We decided to do the same again once the traffic thinned out, but after walking for a few hours we came upon railway tracks. Although it wouldn't be as safe as the fields and hedgerows, it would be faster to follow the tracks.

We moved off in single file, with Séamus again at the front. Progress was pretty good but soon, the line began to stretch out with one or two stragglers limping along. Suddenly, we caught a glimpse of a bright haze in the distance. The lights of a large town - it had to be Newry. It was towards 4.00am on Thursday when we crossed a bridge over the main road, with Newry off to the left. We needed to be careful.

A little further on there was a minor road to the right. Séamus scampered down the embankment and read the signpost - Camlough 3 miles. This was it. Time to get off the tracks and head into God's Country, as the South Armagh lads always called it.

We trudged along the winding, hilly roads and crossed fields to avoid having to pass farmhouses, but the dogs still barked out in the silence. We were now moving into friendly territory but couldn't venture too far, in case we encountered Brit undercover units dug in. So we thought it best to



make contact with supporters as soon as possible.

We made our way to a farm and slipped into the milking shed to drink as much as we could. From there we moved to a hayshed and bedded down for the driest, most comfortable sleep of the week. Later that Thursday morning, we moved into the farmhouse to well-deserved baths and a welcome feed of freshly-baked bread. Almost home, but I wouldn't rest easy until we were in the hands of the South Armagh Brigade.

It was shortly after 7.00pm and we were finishing off a great evening meal when I heard a number of cars draw up to the house. We thanked and said our farewells to the good people who had welcomed and fed us, and were soon speeding along in comfort into the heart of South Armagh.

Brendan Moley, one of our drivers (who was later killed on active service), was ecstatic about us arriving safely with them. His confident air and friendly banter helped everyone relax. We were safe with him - everyone realised that

It finally sunk in. We had smashed the H-Blocks wide open and were now with true friends and comrades, celebrating the victory along the narrow winding roads of South Armagh.

This was freedom.

# Rearguard and the aftermath

**B**ACK IN H7, the rearguard carried out their tasks and waited for the expected brutality from screws. A member of the rearguard here describes the events in the aftermath of the escape:

Our task was to hold the block for as long as possible. One man, dressed as a screw, who had replaced Joe and Sean at the front gate, was supported by other members of the rearguard nearby. We had two classrooms full of screws to guard while also staffing the control room. It was essential to maintain an outwardly normal appearance to the rest of the jail. In particular, we had to deal with any phone calls without raising suspicions. There was one call – someone wanted to talk to a screw who didn't even work in H7, so it was answered easily enough.

The team at the front gate had wooden wedges to be driven into the keyholes, to delay entry into the block and so ensure a safe retreat for the rearguard. As time passed, our excitement grew because the longer it went on without the balloon going up, the better the chances of complete success.

When agitated voices started coming over the radio in the control room, we knew it was time for a disciplined withdrawal. The front gate team was called back into the block. We tied up the MO but left him with John Adams in the toilets. Before locking up in our cells, we lit a small fire at the washroom in each wing and burned ponchos, hoods, and some captured documents.

I locked up in a cell with two other members of the rearguard. We now had a chance to relax and catch our breath, and wonder just how successful the operation had been. It was by then after 4.30pm and we could hear the screws banging on the door of the classroom. It made us snigger – they now knew what it was like to be locked up and want out.

First reports of "a mass breakout from the Maze" came on Downtown Radio at 5.00pm. We hugged each other as a cheer went up from the cells around us. It was a fantastic feeling hearing that report over the radio but

we craved more details, especially about how many got away.

Soon afterwards armed RUC officers, Brits and screws with dogs surrounded the block. We all knew we were in for a hard time but the most important thing was that the operation had been a success. As we were in a cell in A Wing facing on to the front yard, we could see the comings and goings. The RUC and Brits seemed very apprehensive approaching the block, so we were careful when at the window – they looked nervous enough to loose off a few rounds at anything that moved.

They eventually entered the block and released the screws. John Adams was taken out on a stretcher. The other screws, dressed only in underpants with blankets over them, looked a sorry sight as they got into vans. We could hear some of them in hysterics in the circle, shouting for revenge, wanting to come down the wings to get at us. They were ushered out into vans and driven away.

The next radio bulletin mentioned that a screw had been killed. I assumed it was John Adams and thought to myself, "They're gonna kill us." In the middle of the armed RUC officers we noticed a governor, Bill McConnell, carrying what I took to be his personal firearm. This fine Christian man was ranting and raving about what he'd love to do with us.

There was pandemonium among them. Dozens of headcounts were carried out – they hadn't a clue how many had escaped nor their identities. They were also very cautious because they weren't sure whether we had weapons.

We knew it wouldn't be long until they came in to search the cells. They started in our wing and in the first cell they hit were Cormac Mac Art, Kevin McCracken and Seando Moore. The governor, McConnell, threatened Kevin that if anything was found in the cell he would blow his head off (Kevin was a key member of the rearguard. After his release he went back on active service with the IRA and was shot dead by the British Army in March 1988.)



• Vol KEVIN McCRAKEN

When they reached our cell, the door was pulled open and an RUC officer armed with a Ruger rifle covered us. We were ordered out one at a time, spread-eagled against the wall and searched. We were kept in that position until a couple of them went through our cell. I think they were making sure we had no weapons. Then they threw us back in again.

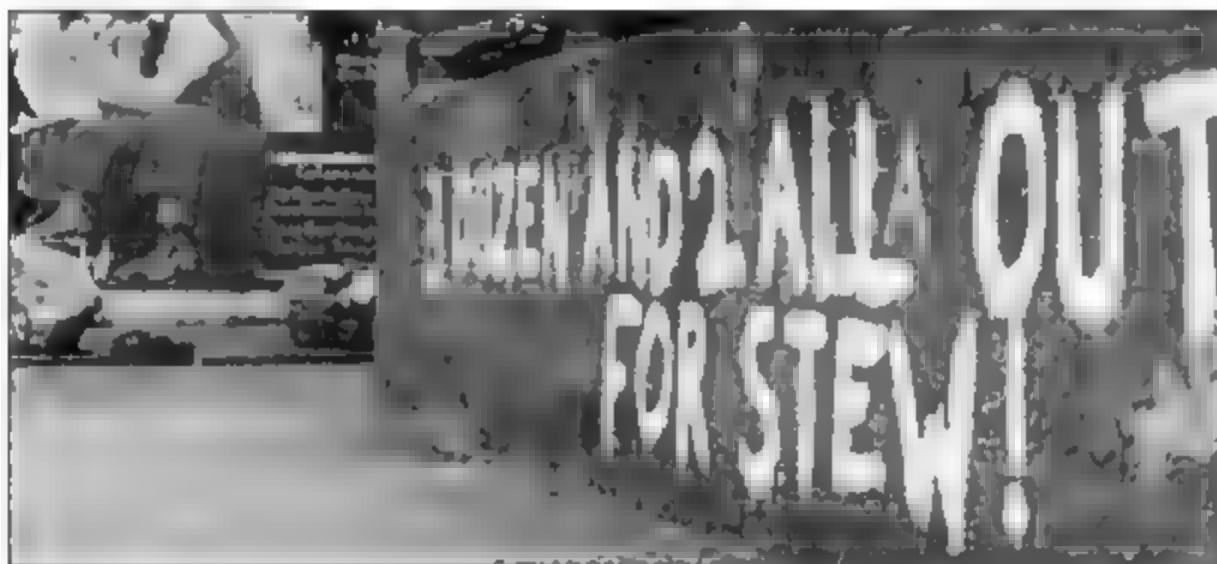
We kept a constant watch on the front yard to try and gauge what was coming next. Before long the RUC lined up ranks facing each other, forming a corridor between the front door and the front gate of the block. This was it, we were being moved out, more than likely to the unoccupied wings of H8.

A number of governors, including McConnell, then arrived on the scene and spoke to the senior RUC officer. All of a sudden the RUC ranks broke and they left the block. It was obvious that, having made sure there were no weapons in the block, the governors and screws had resumed control. This was their chance for revenge.

Hordes of screws now arrived into the block. The atmosphere reminded me of a wing move during the blanket protest when the waiting was the worst. I was glad when they started with our wing.

We watched the screws pulling the first couple of lads down the yard, handcuffed. They weren't fully clothed and I was soon to find out why. When the screws opened our cells I put my radio in the pocket of my coat and walked out onto the wing. It was full of screws and the first thing they did was to take my coat off and fling it back into the cell. I was told to run up to the washroom. I refused and they pushed me up the wing.

When I reached the washroom there was a hostile group of screws waiting to do a strip-search. The fire we had lit was being rekindled with new pieces of clothing and it wasn't long before my underpants, socks, trainers



and jumper ended up in it. I was left wearing only a pair of jeans and a vest. During the strip-search there was a lot of verbal abuse, pushing and shoving. So far so good

After the search I was handcuffed and pulled towards the circle. It was packed with screws and governors. There were a couple of tables with bits of paper on them, including lists of names. The block SO, Geordie Smiley, was behind one of the tables. He asked my name and number. I gave my name and immediately half a dozen voices squealed, "What's your fucking number?" Just like the blanket days again, I thought. I got a thump on the back of the head. I said my name again. Smiley stood up, looked straight into my face, marked something on a sheet of paper and pushed me towards the front door of the block. "My God," I thought, "they still haven't a clue who's away."

From the front door I could see right down the yard. The gate was open and dogs were barking excitedly. The screws had them on very long leashes. I caught a glimpse of Paddy Reddin - one of the dogs had jumped on him, and I saw him struggle with it before running into H8

I decided then that I was going to sprint across in my bare feet. As I got to the bottom of the yard a PO called Sam Harris arrived on the scene - we knew him to be fair during the blanket protest and the screws were a bit wary of him. I managed to avoid a mauling from the dogs and I believe Harris' presence helped me

There was another reception committee in the circle of H8. They took the cuffs off and then tried to make me run down to the wing. All 88 of us were moved and as it progressed the screws grew more and more vicious.

We were put in cells on our own. Again, I was at the front of the block and was able to see the rest of the lads arriving from H7. As the screws got more brutal we had to control ourselves and not shout out, but it was very

hard to remain silent when we saw men being battered

It was late that night before everybody was moved across. Everyone had been beaten and several had serious dog bites, so the block OC told us all to request a doctor the following morning. How naive could we be. The POA (Prison Officers' Association) had taken full control of H8 and all medical attention was refused. It was to be almost two weeks before we were allowed to see a doctor - plenty of time for bruises to fade

We didn't get much sleep in the following nights because at 15 minute intervals, screws banged on cell doors and grilles.

We were isolated and without radios, TV or newspapers and so knew nothing about the fate of the escapers. The screws would talk loudly together about so-and-so having been caught and shot dead in an attempt to weaken our morale. We didn't get out of the cells at all for the first couple of days. We were then offered the prison civilian-type clothing which we refused. After that, we were allowed out to the yard in our bare feet - it was freezing but it was good to see the lads again

At the end of the week some of our clothes were thrown in. I got my coat back and the

radio was still in the pocket. It was the only one in the block. I'll always remember the first news I heard. There was talk of Prior (the British Direct Ruler) resigning and Paisley was saying there had been dummies in the lookout posts. The escape was still the major story and the Brits were still reeling. I relayed everything to the lads in Irish. The news that 19 had got away was great - no matter what they did to us, we had won a tremendous victory

During this period we were taken over to H7 to see the RUC. It was a formality - straight over, nothing to say, straight back again

It was a while before we got visits with our families and when we did, we went down dressed as we were. They were closed visits (a perspex screen prevented physical contact) and lasted only a minute or so. As soon as our visitors asked what had happened to us after the escape or whether we had been beaten, the screws dragged us out

It is hard to describe the feeling within the lads in H8 at this time, compared to the other blocks. Obviously things were different. We had lost 38 men out of the block, and had humiliated the screws and administration. We expected revenge and brutality and we got it. So it took us a while to recharge our batteries and fight back against our conditions.

We occupied only three of the wings in H8 and in late October the fourth, C Wing, was filled up with republicans taken from the other blocks. As the majority of the influx were men noted for standing up to the screws, I think this was a move by the NIO to try and break the grip the POA had on H8

Between October and Christmas there were numerous confrontations with the screws. By the start of 1984 we had broken down the regime and achieved conditions similar to those in the other blocks



# The road to Scarva

*The story of the IRA back-up operation*

**N**O ONE PAID any attention to the red and blue Ford box van travelling north, 12 miles outside Newry, that turned off the A27 and drove at a measured pace over the double humpback bridge that straddles the River Bann and on into the village of Scarva, in the loyalist heartland of North Armagh.

In the centre of the village, at the Parish Hall where the union jack was flying at full mast, the van turned right and continued on for a further quarter of a mile along by a stone wall that marked the boundary of a large private estate. There, it pulled in to a small lay-by, outside a row of whitewashed houses, some still festooned with loyalist regalia from the marching season in the previous month. It was 3.45pm on Sunday afternoon. The weather forecast for that day had said, "Mist or fog in many places at first. Sunny periods developing becoming warm during the afternoon."

And things were certainly starting to warm up now.

For 15 minutes or so, the van remained largely unnoticed. But shortly after 4pm, the curiosity of one resident in the adjacent houses, a man in his 50s, got the better of him and he came out and began walking once or twice around the van. In a tiny village like Scarva, not much passes unnoticed.

iced for long. But whatever the man's suspicions, he had no time to act on them.

In the cab of the van, Brendan Burns, a highly-experienced Volunteer in the IRA's South Armagh Brigade, reached for the length of rubber pipe that provided the only means of communication with his comrades in the rear compartment. "He's round at the back now," he called down the pipe "Neck him."

The metal rolling door of the compartment slid quickly up, and Brendan Moley and another Volunteer silently hauled the startled man into the back of the van, closing the door as fast as they had opened it. He had just a moment to notice that there were six men in the compartment and an awesome array of weaponry before a hood was pulled down over his head and he was sat firmly in the corner. Brendan Burns and his six comrades continued to wait, as the heat of the afternoon sun bore down and the rest of Scarva's inhabitants remained oblivious to the presence in their midst.

Brendan Moley was the Intelligence Officer for the South Armagh Brigade and one of its most experienced operators. Six weeks earlier, he had begun preparations for what, even by his standards, was a major military operation. Almost alone within the IRA in South Armagh, he knew that this operation entailed meeting and collecting the 38 escapees from H7 and moving them quickly to carefully-selected



safe houses, and he knew that there was every possibility of a fierce encounter with British Army/RUC forces on the road home once the balloon went up.

Without specifying what the purpose of the planning was, Moley set about organising ten safe houses in Crossmaglen village to look after the escapees in the immediate aftermath of the jailbreak. The choice of Crossmaglen was a deliberate if surprising one. The centre of the village is occupied by a massive British Army base with, reputedly, the heaviest concentration of military helicopter takeoffs and landings in Western Europe. Moley reckoned that the British forces would assume that the village itself would be too risky a proposition for concealing so many escapees, and that they would work on the premise that the IRA would disperse throughout the countryside, those escapees reaching the border area. That would indeed have been the obvious choice. Moley, therefore, did the opposite.

Moley also instructed other Volunteers to fit out the Ford box van, which had been commandeered well in advance, with two welded tripod mounts to hold Browning .50 heavy-calibre guns. The five-inch rounds fired by the Brownings were capable of cutting through pursuing armoured vehicles like a knife through butter, as well as bringing down British Army helicopters.

Less than two days before the escape, Moley assembled the Volunteers directly involved in the pick-up operation and briefed them for the first time. The seven Volunteers, including Moley, who were to move out of South Armagh into the unfamiliar operational territory around Scarva were picked on the basis of their experience and training. Despite the risks involved, they were confident that they had a plan and sufficient firepower to overcome any obstacle which might be placed in their path.

When the red Ford van rolled into



\* The lay-by where South Armagh Volunteers waited for the escapees

Scarva village that Sunday afternoon, the Volunteers in the rear compartment were armed, in addition to the two mounted Browning .50s, with an M60 machine gun and an assortment of rifles. Armalites, a Heckler and Koch G3 and Belgian CALs. Brendan Burns, the wheelman on this as on many earlier jobs, was also armed. A radio scanner in the rear compartment was monitoring enemy transmissions, while the Volunteers were also in radio contact with five cars patrolling along the roads leading back towards the first rendezvous point in South Armagh – the village of Whitecross. The primary function of these cars was to scout the van's route home from Scarva, but each car also contained armed Volunteers in case of complications. The van itself had been carefully measured beforehand to ensure that the rear compartment could accommodate the additional 33 passengers who were expected to rendezvous in the H-Block food lorry. (The tally lodge rearguard, making their way out in a commandeered screw's car, were to rendezvous separately with a number of cars close to the jail, before being taken on to safe houses.)

Along that route too, at a place not far from Poyntz Pass and again at Mount Norris and at Whitecross, the IRA had concealed three 1000-lb landmines. Each of these mines was to be detonated after the van containing the escapers had passed, blocking the route and deterring pursuit. In Whitecross, the escapers were to be transferred to cars and driven into Crossmaglen village.

Back in Scarva, the Volunteers in the back of the van monitored the RUC pre-



• The village of Scarva, County Armagh

arranged call sign for a jailbreak from Long Kesh – Operation Vesper – over the scanner. This came at 4.12pm, nearly half an hour after their arrival in the village. At this point they knew that the escape had at least partially succeeded, but also that not everything had gone according to plan. The original hope was that the main body of escapers would have rendezvoused with the IRA back up in Scarva before the alarm was raised. Now, Brendan Moley and his comrades knew that the British Army/RUC escape contingency plan, concentrating on blocking routes into Belfast and leading to the border, would be brought into effect. Still they waited.

Fifteen minutes later, over the scanner, they heard RUC control enquiring if the contingency plan was in operation, and then – to their amazement – a confused RUC officer asking in response, "Is this a practice or is it the real thing?" The agitated response from RUC control, stressing that it was indeed the "real thing" and to get a move on, was less than polite! So it is

clear that despite subsequent RUC claims to have had their contingency plan in effect from 4.25pm, any roadblocks they established by that time were less than comprehensive and covered only a handful of possible escape routes.

Some ten minutes or so after this second call (and some half an hour after the escapers made their bid for freedom), the IRA unit in Scarva realised that, whatever had happened, the rendezvous would not be made and withdrew from the village, returning along their prearranged route without encountering any roadblocks or opposition from British forces. The reluctant passenger they had collected in Scarva was deposited unharmed in Whitecross, doubtless not so inclined to investigate suspicious vehicles in future!

Although the breakdown of the escape plan at the tally lodge of the H-Blocks had thwarted the rendezvous, Brendan Moley's plan had provided a textbook military operation. It was not all wasted.

Over the next few days, and in the case of one group of escapers two weeks later, 18 of the 19 who successfully evaded recapture in the immediate aftermath found their way into South Armagh, either under their own steam or handed over by other IRA units in the Six Counties. One of those to meet them and drive them to safe houses in Crossmaglen village was Brendan Moley himself.

At one of the handover points – an isolated crossroads in South Armagh – one escaper, not knowing where he was being taken and clearly anxious to be out of the North, asked one of the armed Volunteers who was there to meet them: "Are we in the Free State yet?"

"No," said the South Armagh man, laughing, "but don't worry, you're in the safest part of Ireland now."



# The 'rare character' and the thinker

A TRIBUTE TO THE  
TWO BRENDANS

THE DEATH on active service of Volunteers Brendan Moley and Brendan Burns on 29 February 1988, in a premature explosion outside Crossmaglen, deprived the IRA of two of its most experienced and committed soldiers.

Both aged 30 when they died, Moley was from Dorsey, Cullyhanna, while Burns was from Crossmaglen. Both Volunteers had attended the same school, had each joined the Fianna at the age of 16, and had then graduated to full-time active service with the IRA in South Armagh during 1976.

Described by a comrade as "a rare character", Brendan Burns had a happy-go-lucky personality and was impatient when indoors, preferring all the time to be on the go. Brendan Moley, as his central role in the H-Block escape plan indicated, was known among his comrades as a thinker and a meticulous organiser. Both men were courageous to an extreme degree.

Among the scores of operations in which they took part, many of which even now cannot be detailed for fear of compromising their comrades who remain active, two are singled out as illustrating their determination and coolness in the face of the enemy.

On 17 April 1979, two RUC landrovers were travelling along the Newry-Camlough Road in the direction of Newry. A massive van bomb was parked at the side of the road, with a command wire leading back several hundred yards in the Camlough direction. Brendan Burns, positioned a short distance from the road, was the Volunteer at the firing point. As the first landrover passed the van bomb, Burns detonated it, killing the four RUC occupants instantly. However, as Burns stepped on to the road to make his escape, the second landrover reversed at speed up alongside him and its occupants got out.

To his astonishment the RUC officers merely asked him had he seen anything suspicious prior to the explosion! Explaining that he hadn't and pausing for a few moments to express his shock at the blast, Burns walked



Up to 2,000 RUC and British Army personnel swamped the villages of Cullyhanna and Crossmaglen during the funerals of Volunteers Moley and Burns away, to be picked up in a car nearby which was driven by Brendan Moley.

On 9 July 1986, at around 8.45pm, Brendan Burns drove a lorry loaded with a bomb along the Glassdrummond Road near Crossmaglen and parked it adjacent to the recently constructed British Army observation post. Because reconstruction work was taking place at the post, a number of British soldiers were positioned close to the road in a billet, designed to prevent attacks on the sappers carrying out this work. Although at this stage Burns was on the run and well known to enemy personnel, he got out of the lorry and called out to the soldiers in the billet to come down to the road, as he wanted to talk to them. Four soldiers came running down. At the last moment Brendan Moley drove by, travelling in the opposite direction, and picked Burns up seconds before the bomb was detonated. Two British soldiers were killed in this attack and two others were injured. Between that time and the death of Burns and Moley less than two years later, the same post was attacked by IRA mortars on four separate occasions.

Shortly after Burns' participation in the H-Block escape operation at Scarva, he was arrested by 26 County authorities in Dundalk, on the basis of a British extradition warrant in connection with the killing of five British soldiers in a landmine attack near Camlough in 1981. He spent two years in Portlaoise prison before, in 1985, the warrant was ruled to be invalid on a technicality. Evading Garda Special Branch attempts to re-arrest him or

keep him under surveillance until a new warrant was served, Burns stayed on the run both in the Six Counties and in the 26 Counties until his death, but remained active in South Armagh.

On 29 February 1988, while moving a 300-lb bomb closer to Crossmaglen in preparation for an attack on British forces, Brendan Moley and Brendan Burns were killed in an accidental explosion. Even in death the two men remained an object of fear to the British forces. Despite the RUC having claimed to have taken both bodies to the mortuary, Brendan Moley's body remained for four days at the spot where he had died until friends and relatives searching the area on 3 March discovered it. At the funerals on 5 March up to 2,000 British soldiers and RUC swamped Crossmaglen and Cullyhanna, harassing mourners and launching a series of baton charges against those attending the funeral of Brendan Burns.

The final tribute to both Volunteers from their comrades in the South Armagh Brigade was fittingly paid at the spot adjacent to the Glassdrummond observation post where they had been such a thorn in the side of the enemy. As the bodies were being brought back into South Armagh on the evening of 3 March from the mortuary in Armagh city, the cortège paused at the spot. IRA Volunteers emerged from nearby fields and fired a volley of shots over each coffin, before pausing for a minute's silent respect for each of their fallen comrades.

# Closing the stable door

## — The Hennessy Report

**I**N THE IMMEDIATE aftermath of the escape, which Margaret Thatcher described as "the gravest in our prison history", the British political establishment rushed to try to find some explanation for what had happened, and to find somewhere to apportion blame amid severed loyalist demands for the sacking of Direct Ruler James Prior and his minister with responsibility for prisons and 'security', Nicholas Scott.

On 26 September, the day after the escape, Sir James Hennessy, the chief inspector of the British prison service flew into the Six Counties to begin an "inquiry into the security arrangements at HM Prison, Maze, relative to the escape on Sunday, 25 September 1983".

Spending nearly five weeks based at Long Kesh, Hennessy produced an 84-page report, published speedily in January 1984, which spelled out in some detail how the escape had been achieved but failed to answer key questions, such as how the POWs had managed to smuggle weapons into the jail, and how they had developed such a detailed awareness of prison layout and security procedures outside the H-Block in which they were held.

His 118 conclusions and recommendations comprehensively exposed the physical and human weaknesses in the security set-up within the H-Blocks, yet the irony was all too apparent — the same weaknesses had already been recognised, and in many cases manipulated, by the planners of the H7 escape. It was a classic case of closing the stable door after the horses had bolted!



• NICHOLAS SCOTT

Writing on the planning for the escape, Hennessy noted: "It should not surprise anyone...that an escape — even from a prison such as the Maze — should have been planned and attempted. What is surprising, perhaps, is that it should have succeeded, and in such large measure. Here was a prison designed to contain terrorists, and intended to be the most secure prison in Northern Ireland, with its perimeter breached by no less than 35 prisoners. Viewed in this light the escape was not merely audacious and daring, it must be judged the most serious escape in the recent history of the United Kingdom Prison Services. What went wrong?"

Hennessy recognised that the theoretical physical security of the H-Blocks — with the exception of the block control room and the tally lodge — was good, but like the



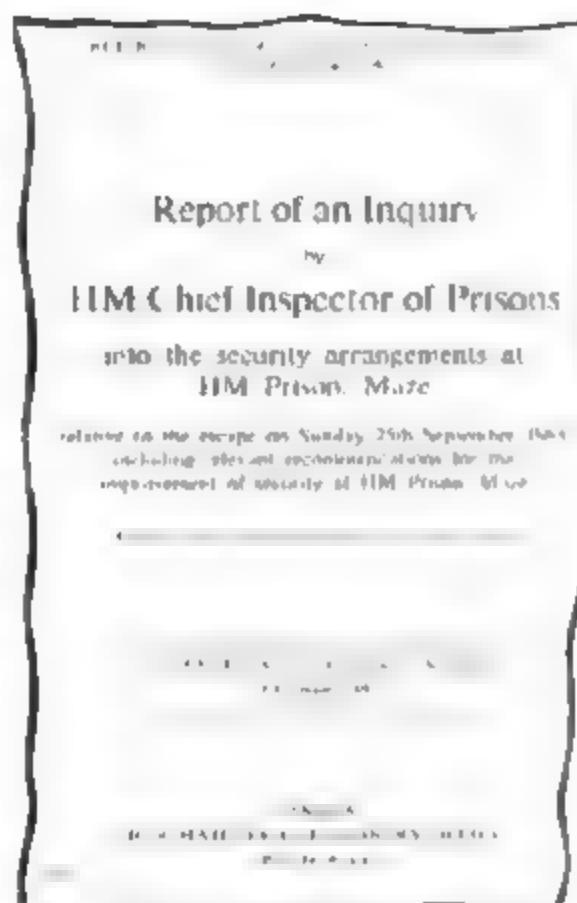
• The 118 conclusions contained in the Hennessy Report exposed the physical and human weaknesses in the security set up within the H-Blocks

POWs had earlier done, he realised that these measures were only as strong as the individual screws staffing and enforcing them.

He remarked too on the POWs' success in getting key personnel involved in the preparation and execution of the escape appointed as orderlies within the block, in contravention of prison security policy on vetting of orderlies, and on the inability of individual screws or the H-Block's Security Department to suspect an escape was being planned – despite the presence of potential clues to such an escape.

The reality was, in part, that the POWs had accurately judged the self-interested complacency of most of the screws in H7 who were anxious to avoid confrontations with republican prisoners – a complacency that allowed the escape planners a margin for error or mishap in what was, overall, a highly secure operation. In one instance, shortly before the escape, Rab Kerr accidentally dropped a watch while playing snooker in the games room. Prisoners were not allowed watches, but a number had been smuggled in to H7 to coordinate the precise timings required during the block takeover. As Rab retrieved the watch, another POW, in order to divert the attention of a screw standing nearby, asked the screw: "Here, what's the time?" "Why don't you ask your mate?" was the screw's sardonic reply, making no attempt to recover the watch he had clearly seen. On the evening before the escape itself, Gerry Kelly and Bik McFarlane were talking through the grilles that separated their respective wings. The film showing on the TV in the dining room in Kelly's wing was Escape from Devil's Island. "A good omen," Kelly said to Bik. Just at that, a screw walked up to Bik who was watching the film through the grille, and joked: "Did you get any tips from that?"

But Hennessy recognised that the POWs had not depended on this complacency to any significant degree. Acknowledging that the weapons and other materials must have been smuggled into the jail over several weeks preceding the escape, his report stated that B Wing of H7 had been searched on 25 August, 17 cells in H7 had been searched at random on 13 September, and that on the day of the escape itself, the dining and wash rooms in B and D Wings, the hobbies room in D Wing, and all the cells in C Wing had been searched. In addition, the POWs them-



selves were regularly searched. Nothing had been found on any of these occasions.

In speculating on just how such a major escape had been executed almost as planned, Hennessy was thrown back, time and time again, to the human shortcomings, complacency and laziness of prison staff at all levels of the administration, and how they had been comprehensively out-thought and manipulated by the POWs: "It is clear that there are men in the Northern Ireland Prison Service now who lack the abilities required of a prison officer and the leadership qualities necessary for the more senior grade appointments – as well as men who are over-concerned with high earnings."

He was particularly critical of the Security Department within the jail, describing it as "woefully inadequate" and saying that the security PC "lacked the necessary attributes for this important post". Recommending his removal from the post, Hennessy also urged the replacement of the prison governor and the assistant governor with responsibility for security.

Although the performance of the RUC and British Army in the post-escape security operation fell largely outside Hennessy's remit, he was generally complimentary about the speed with which the RUC claimed to have established vehicle checkpoints once their escape contingency plan, Operation Vesper, was called. That was at 4.12pm, and the RUC claimed to have had their checkpoints in place thirteen minutes later. Yet, from the account given by the

South Armagh IRA unit in position at the rendezvous point, it is clear that some senior members of the RUC thought that the Operation Vesper call was only a practice, and did nothing about it for at least 15 minutes. This lapse almost certainly assisted many of the escapees, and meant that the South Armagh unit was able to return to base unchallenged more than an hour after the alarm was raised.

In the aftermath of the escape, many of the recommendations urged by Hennessy began, not surprisingly, to be implemented. One area of this involved physical reconstruction of areas of the jail identified by the report as representing fundamental weaknesses – areas such as the block control rooms, where in H7 John Adams had been on duty on the day of the escape, the tally lodge and main gate complex, and the visiting and goods reception areas.

Dealing with the other main area of weakness, the human factor, was more problematic. In surveying the possible options for tightening security in the jail, including draconian measures such as internal body searches and closed visits, Hennessy had conceded reluctantly that there were other, including political, implications to this. It was clear that the prison regime did not relish a return to the confrontational atmosphere of the blanket and hunger-strike protests, nor would the NIO wish to see the resurgence of the external popular protests associated with these periods. Hennessy sought a balance, though one obviously weighted heavily in favour of a harshening of the prison regime. He also sought improvements in the vetting, training and accountability of the screws.

The screws themselves, not merely in H7 but throughout the H-Blocks, had been humiliated and demoralised by the escape. The instinct of many of them, represented by the Prison Officers' Association, was for revenge and a draconian regime. Following the beatings inflicted on the captured escapees and the 88 prisoners who had remained behind in H7 (and who were immediately transferred to H8), as well as on POWs in many of the other blocks, there was a generally brutal regime imposed for several months. However, by the beginning of 1984, as the prisoners in the worst affected blocks regrouped, an atmosphere of normality had returned to most areas of the regime in the H-Blocks. The main punitive measures were reserved for the recaptured escapees and other



• British Direct Ruler Jim Prior – In charge at the time of the escape

POWs deemed to be 'high risk', who were categorised as 'red book' prisoners. These received only closed visits until the end of 1984, had their movements severely restricted within the jail, and had their entitlement to life-sentence prisoners' parole releases delayed, in some cases by years (Bik McFarlane, for instance, who was arrested in Holland in 1986 and extradited at the end of that year, received his first one-week parole release only in August 1993).

Some individual screws, however, attempted to prevent the relaxing of the brutal regime imposed in the aftermath of the escape. One of those was Chief Prison Officer PS Kerr, who had gained notoriety during the blanket protest for his physical assaults on the POWs and for his practice of forcibly spread-eagling naked blanket-men over a table in order for anal searches to be carried out on them. Following the escape, he was appointed acting chief prison officer in charge of the Security Department, to replace the screw who Hennessy had found to "lack the necessary attributes for this important post". Kerr continued with his policy of brutalisation, stepping up the use of the dog squad for

wing searches and assaults on POWs, and attempted to reintroduce the policy of forcible integration on the wings. Kerr was directly responsible for an increase in degrading searches of visitors, the attempted introduction of a new system of closed visits, and for a new isolation unit for republicans in H4.

On 17 February 1985, the IRA executed him in Armagh city. In a warning to like-minded chief prison officers and governors, the IRA statement following the execution stated, "It would be in their best interests to take the lesson from what has happened to him, and to desist in oppressing POWs. The days of torture and oppression must end. If not, someone must pay the price." A similar warning had also been contained in the prepared statement read out to the screws in H7 on the day of the escape, promising retribution for acts of revenge against the POWs who remained behind.

An earlier price had already been paid by H-Block deputy governor William McConnell, who was shot dead by the IRA in Belfast on 6 March 1984 - less than six months after the escape. McConnell had been the key figure in orchestrating the

beatings in H7 after the escape. He had earned his reputation for brutality during the years of the blanket protest, and even at the time of his death was attempting, like Kerr, to entrench a draconian prison regime through physical beatings.

A third key figure in the screws' hierarchy to bear the cost of this brutality was Brian Armour, the vice-chairperson of the Prison Officers' Association. He too had been one of those who, in the immediate aftermath of the escape, had seized effective control of the H-Blocks from the official prison regime for several weeks, and had orchestrated revenge attacks and a series of punishments. He died in an IRA booby-trap car bomb attack in Belfast on 4 October 1988. As with the execution of McConnell, the IRA made clear that his death did not mark a return to the systematic attacks on prison screws at the time of the blanket protests, but that it reserved the right to execute those individuals who spearheaded such a regime of naked brutality.

Hennessy had tacitly acknowledged in his report that the prison regime was effectively divided into three categories - those motivated by sectarian antagonism to the republican POWs, who were intent on imposing as punitive a regime as they could get away with, those primarily motivated by the high earnings available rather than commitment to the job, and finally, those who saw themselves primarily as career screws and were not, in the main, driven by ulterior motives. The ingenuity of the escape was based largely on the recognition by the POWs of these differences - long before the British prison regime and the prisoners' adeptness at exploiting the shortcomings in each of the categories for their own end purpose. It was also based on a cohesiveness among the republican POWs that the prison regime simply could not match.

The final conclusion of Hennessy's report, therefore, was that whatever physical security improvements were made to the H-Blocks, and indeed whatever improvements were made in the training and selection of screws, there could be no absolute guarantee of security in the prison.

"No prison," said Hennessy, "is ever more secure than the weakest member of its staff." Which, after all, was the point from where the plan for the 1983 escape began...

# Where are they now?

In the years since the escape from H7 of Long Kesh, the escapees have undergone a wide range of different experiences – though as occasional reunions between groups of them have shown, they retain a unique bond of comradeship which stems from that risk-sought and gruelling day in September 1983 when each man recognised that the price of their failure might well be his death.

Overlying that bond are the many layers of common experience that had already been shared between them over many years, in many cases for over 20 years – their experiences as republican volunteers in the struggle against British occupation; the interrogation centres such as Castlereagh, Strand Road and Gough where torture and brutality were the norm; their earlier respective experiences of imprisonment in Crumlin Road, the cages of Long Kesh, the H-Blocks, Portlaoise and England; the blanket and no-wash protests, previous escapes and escape attempts; and, worst of all, the experience that all had shared, whether in jail or on the streets, of the terrible sacrifice of the 1981 Hunger Strikes.

All those experiences had given them the necessary discipline, determination, selflessness and courage to plan and execute the escape. It gave those who were successful the qualities to adapt to the hostile political environment in which they suddenly found themselves, where the Dublin Government was all too eager to capture and extradite as many of the men as possible back to the H-Blocks, and the British Government was ready to pull out all the political and diplomatic stops to secure the extradition of escapees wherever they might be – even if it meant distorting or changing the legislation of other countries to do so.

Of the men who were not recaptured during or shortly after the escape, three subsequently lost their lives on renewed active service with the IRA.

For those escapees who were never recaptured, they had to spend many years 'on the run' under assumed identities. Since this publication first appeared in 1993, The Good Friday Agreement opened the way to resolving the situation with republican exiles or 'on

the run' and these are still being dealt with on a case-by-case basis.



KEVIN BARRY ARTT

The last of the 38 escapees to learn of the jail-break plan, only two hours beforehand, Artt had only arrived in the H-Blocks a few weeks earlier, to begin a life sentence following the Christopher Black paid perjurer trial. Artt was one of the six prisoners who attempted to drive out of the jail in a commandeered screw's car.

Becoming separated from the other escapees after jumping out of the crashed car at the external gate, Artt made his way alone to Andersonstown in West Belfast on a stolen bicycle. En route, he was stopped at an RUC checkpoint where he gave the name "William Johnson". He was taken to Lisburn RUC Barracks to have his identity checked, but was released after about an hour.

After the escape, Barry Artt travelled to the USA, living first in San Francisco and then moving in 1986 to San Diego, where he worked as a successful car salesperson under the name Kevin Kehane.

On 3 June 1992, he was arrested in San Diego by the FBI on passport violation charges and held in the Alameda County Jail in Dublin, near San Francisco. The British Government filed an application for his extradition, which was to be dealt with after the passport violation charges.

The issues around Artt's passport violations and the British government's request for

his extradition were only resolved after a major protest was mounted by Irish American supporters and Artt was eventually allowed to remain in the United States.



PAUL BRENNAN

A former internee like many of the other escapees, Paul "Dutch" Brennan from Ballymurphy in West Belfast was arrested in September 1976 and sentenced to 16 years. Brennan had a reputation for hiding his food and – true to form – Jim Clarke recalls of the escape trek he and Paul were part of: "We were outside a farmhouse round the Gillford area. The boys were getting fed up by this stage. Paul Brennan wanted to have something to eat."

Brennan travelled to the USA in 1984 and settled in Berkeley, California in 1985 after meeting Joanna, whom he married in 1989. He has a 13-year-old step-daughter Molly. He was nearly killed a few years ago when, swerving to avoid a deer, his car plunged into a lake. Trapped, with the car filling with water, he was saved by Molly who had managed to free herself and call for help.

Living under the names Richard Earl Martin and later, Pól Morgan, and working as a joker, Brennan was arrested at home on 21 January 1993 and charged with passport violation offences. He was also charged and con-

# THE GREATEST ESCAPE

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victed of obtaining a sporting weapon using false identification. As with Ant the British Government filed an application for his extradition. Again the British agreed not to pursue the extradition.

Brennan was living freely in the United States until January 2008 when he was arrested. He is charged with entering the US on false documentation. At present he is being held at a detention centre in Texas as US authorities have refused him bail.



## JIMMY BURNS

Recaptured dressed in a screw's uniform at a checkpoint within 20 minutes of the escape, Jimmy Burns from Belfast was finally released in 1993 after serving 17 years of a life sentence. Jimmy had been one of nine Volunteers tasked to secure the tally hut where fighting broke out between prisoners and screws. Their efforts increased the chances of the other escapees to flee.

## SÉAMUS CAMPBELL

One of the five escapees who was never recaptured, Séamus Campbell from Coalisland, County Tyrone had been serving a 14-year sentence for possession of explosives after his arrest in June 1980.

In 1993, ten years after the escape, Campbell said that he had "no regrets" and that, whatever the length of his sentence remaining in September 1983 (he had about four years left to serve), he regarded it as his republican duty to escape. "I had total confidence in our ability to escape, both in terms of the plan and the calibre of those people involved with me."

For three years after the escape, Séamus Campbell adopted a disciplined low-profile approach to his situation 'on the run'. "During one year, I only went out socially three times." But in other ways he was able to move about fairly freely. He recalls, particularly, one night some time after the escape when he, Pádraig McKearney and Séamus McElwaine called to the McElwaine family

home in County Monaghan. "It was the first meeting between Séamus and his family since the escape," says Campbell, "because immediately after the escape the house had been placed under surveillance by the Free State hoping to catch Séamus. Then, eventually, the 24-hour surveillance was lifted and we arrived at the house the following night."

An equally memorable recollection, though not a happy one, is of the night he and Pádraig McKearney arrived at a billet near the border, early in December 1983. "The people in the house had been listening to the news, and told me that two IRA Volunteers had been shot dead in Coalisland. No names had been released at that stage, but I immediately said 'One of them's my brother.' The previous night I had dreamt about Brian's death, that's how I knew." [IRA Volunteers Brian Campbell and Colm McGinn were executed in an SAS stakeout on 4 December 1983.] "I was suffering from a bad case of pneumonia at the time. I was drained, really exhausted, so it was extremely difficult to cope with that happening at that time."

Asked in 1993 whether he had returned to the North since his escape, Séamus Campbell smiled: "A saying of Eoghan Ruá Ó'Neill's was 'Is liom séin Cúige Uladh ailiig' – 'The whole of the province of Ulster belongs to me.' I can honestly claim to have been in every county of Ireland during the past ten years, as well as periods when I've been out of the country. Being an escaper doesn't come into it, you go where you need to go, and you rely on the soundness of the people looking after you and putting you up in their homes."

Nicknamed 'Spanner' because of his pre-

arrest work as a mechanic, Séamus adopted a variety of pseudonyms depending on where he was while 'on the run'. During the 1993 interview, a woman joined the company briefly and called him by a name different to the one the interviewer had been advised to use if anyone was about. "She's anti-republican," said Séamus. "she'd be horrified if she knew who I was or even that I was a republican. You learn to blend in when you're on the run, to be one thing in one place and a different thing in the next. I feel as comfortable now walking down O'Connell Street in Dublin wearing a suit as I do wearing Wellingtons on a farm in Kerry. The other thing you learn, moving about so much, is about people in different areas, what makes them tick and what issues concern them."

Séamus Campbell was never recaptured after the escape.

## JIM CLARKE

One of the group to escape cross-country towards South Armagh, Jim Clarke from Letterkenny in County Donegal had been serving an 18-year sentence following his arrest in Derry in 1978.

On 3 December 1984, in the RUC/Gardai follow-up to an IRA operation the previous night in County Fermanagh which had resulted in the deaths of Volunteers Antoine Mac Giolla Bhríghde and fellow escaper Kieran Fleming as well as an SAS soldier, Clarke and another man were arrested at a roadblock near Pettigo, close to the Fermanagh border, after a car chase.

Sentenced in Dublin to 18 months for a rifle found in the car, Jim Clarke was unpris-



• Jim Clarke with wife Deirdre and son Ciarán

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oned in Portlaoise. Shortly before his release date, knowing that an extradition warrant would be served, Clarke was one of twelve men, including Robert Russell, who made an unsuccessful escape attempt on 24 November 1985. He received an additional three years for that attempt.

Then, three weeks before his next release date, Clarke was taken to the District Court and served with British extradition warrants relating to his original charges in the Six Counties and the H7 escape. Held without bail throughout the following two years, his extradition upheld by the District Court and High Court, Jim Clarke finally won his battle in a landmark judgement in the 26 County Supreme Court, along with Dermot Finucane. Clarke was set free on 13 March 1990, returning to a rapturous reception in his native Donegal.

Recalling the escape trek in 1983, Jim pays special tribute to Séamus McElwaine "shrewd for the country, checking out the fields before we crossed them" – who had been able to distinguish potentially friendly nationalist farmhouses from hostile loyalist ones by the type of farming employed. It was McElwaine who selected the farmhouse in South Armagh which the escapees eventually approached, and from where the contact with the South Armagh Brigade was made.

After crossing the border, Clarke was together with Gerry McDonnell for a while before moving to Donegal where he stayed with Kieran Fleming, to whom he became close. He recalls how, a short time before his death, Kieran was shot and wounded in an engagement with British troops, and lost his weapon in the withdrawal. "He was really cut up about losing the weapon and swore he wouldn't let it happen again, so he made himself a lanyard for it so that it would be attached to his arm during an operation. I've often wondered if it was still with him when his body was recovered."

Jim Clarke is now married, with a young son who is named after his friend and comrade, Kieran Fleming.

## SÉAMUS CLARKE

Séamus Clarke from North Belfast was arrested in 1975 and received a life sentence. After the escape he remained on the run until 1987. On 26 November of that year, he was arrested in a house in Dublin and subsequently sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in Portlaoise Jail. He was released in March 1993 and since that time has been living in Dublin.



JOE COREY

Recaptured with Paddy McIntyre two days after the escape, after reaching what they hoped was a safe house in Castlewellan, Joe Corey from County Derry was finally released in 1992 after serving 14 years of a life sentence.

## DENNIS CUMMINGS

Caught in the tally lodge melee as he attempted to buy time for his escaping comrades, Dennis Cummings from County Tyrone was released on licence in 1994/95. Denis was another of those Volunteers whose courage at the tally lodge provided maximum opportunity for the other prisoners to make good their escape. His brother Christy, also a former POW, was shot and seriously wounded when LVF gunmen attacked doormen at the Glengannon Hotel in County Tyrone, in revenge for the INLA killing of Billy Wright.



JIMMY DONNELLY

One of the six POWs to attempt to escape in

the screw's car, Jimmy Donnelly from Ardoyne in North Belfast was serving a 15-year sentence following his arrest in November 1981 and his conviction on the perjured evidence of Christopher Black.

When the car crashed into the external gate, Donnelly was trapped in the back of the car and was recaptured immediately. However when the charges against those held solely on the evidence of Black were overturned at the appeal court in Belfast, Donnelly got bail in October 1986 – on the outstanding escape charges. He jumped bail, remaining at liberty until his re-arrest in Ardoyne in March 1989. He was sentenced to five years for the escape, but with time served on remand was released in November 1991.



DERMOT FINUCANE

Arrested along with Bobby Storey on the day of hunger striker Mickey Devine's death in August 1981, after a high-speed car chase through West Belfast minutes after a shooting attack on British soldiers, Dermot Finucane from Lenadoon in Belfast received an 18-year sentence for possession. (A charge of attempting to kill the British soldiers failed when the fragmented bullets recovered after the attack could not be forensically matched with the weapons found in Finucane's car).

In November 1987, Dermot Finucane was arrested by 26 County forces at Granard, County Longford, along with Paul Kane, during a search of over 50,000 houses looking for Dessie O'Hare's INLA gang and in the aftermath of the capture of the *Eksund* arms shipment. During the next two and a half years, Finucane was held in Portlaoise without bail, awaiting extradition. This was not relaxed even when, two days before his High

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Court appearance, his brother Pat - a high-profile Belfast solicitor involved in the shoot-to-kill and Gibraltar cases - was assassinated by loyalists.

On 13 March 1990, the 26 County Supreme Court refused to uphold Finucane's extradition (see separate article) and he was released.

One of the eight men who hid under the floorboards for two weeks after the escape, Dermot singles out 'Goose' Russell as the "heart and soul" who made that uncomfortable situation bearable. "Goose was coming out with all these crazy ideas, but if it hadn't been for him, it would have been much harder. While we were under the floorboards, he was working out a plan, in the event of our arrest, for taking over the holding block of Castlereagh and fighting our way out! He told 'Spanner' Campbell to work out a plan for Gough Barracks, in case that's where we'd be taken.

"Goose was always telling stories and getting carried away. If the people upstairs had people in visiting, we'd all be whispering really low, but Goose would get carried away and he'd bang his head against the floorboards, and we'd hear the visitors ask 'What's that noise?' and the people of the house trying to cover up by saying 'Oh, that's just the heating pipes'. At night it was cold under the floorboards, and we'd be huddling together for warmth - Goose always wanted in the middle! The craic was brilliant."

Reaching the 26 Counties along with Gerry Kelly, the two were billeted together in a house. A short time after their arrival, Dermot celebrated his birthday. Learning of this from Kelly, the family bought vodka and beer although they were teetotal. "Gerry and I were sitting having a few drinks, some of the family had joined us and we were having a bit of a singsong, and then all of a sudden the lights were knocked out and the door was opened, and there was the mother and father

of the house with this giant birthday cake with my name on it. I was really taken aback by the whole welcome we were getting from people. Every house we were in, the people really went overboard to make us feel welcome. We were like part of their family."

## KIERAN FLEMING

Arrested in Derry in 1976 at the age of 16, Kieran Fleming had been sentenced to indefinite detention as an SOSP prisoner.

One of the key figures in the planned execution of the escape, Kieran had originally been intended to be part of the tally lodge rearguard unit. However, on the Thursday before the escape, while playing football in the H7 yard, he broke his arm in a clash with fellow-escaper Brendan Mead. Hornsby at the prospect of being transferred to the prison hospital and missing the escape, Fleming was taken to see the doctor on Friday. "How is it?" asked the doctor, grabbing his hand and bending the broken arm. "Oh, it's not too bad, doctor," replied Kieran through clenched teeth, nearly fainting with the pain. Kieran stayed in H7 and on the escape, though his tally lodge role was given to someone else.

Fleeing from Long Kesh in a car along with Gerry Kelly, Séamus Clarke, Dermot Finucane and Padraig McKearney, suggestions were flying about what route they should take. Gerry Kelly recalls: "Everyone wanted to go towards their own home area because they knew it. Pádraig wanted to walk around and swim part of Lough Neagh. He kept saying 'We'll walk the lough, we'll walk the lough, we'll go up into Tyrone'. Kieran said then that he couldn't swim but that he was willing to try."

Active along the Donegal border after the escape, Fleming - nicknamed 'Hush Hush' remained willing to try whatever was necessary. On the night of 2 December 1984, following a shoot-out with the SAS, IRA Volunteers were forced to withdraw on foot

and to swim the River Bannagh which marked the Fermanagh/Donegal border. Despite not being able to swim, as well as having an admitted fear of water, Kieran Fleming attempted to cross the river. It was nearly three weeks and after a prolonged search by his family, friends and other republicans that his drowned body was recovered from the river on 21 December.

Mourners at his funeral in Derry were savagely attacked by the RUC using baton charges and firing plastic bullets.

## GERARD FRYERS

Serving a sentence of 20 years at the time of the escape, after his conviction in 1980, Gerard 'Rinty' Fryers was one of the group who hid under floorboards for two weeks before being moved to Crossmaglen and over the border. Fryers, from West Belfast is one of the escapees who was never re-captured.

## BILLY GORMAN

In the dash from the tally lodge, Billy Gorman from Belfast had got tangled in the barbed wire fence and despite the efforts of Harry Murray to free him had been recaptured. Gorman had been sentenced in 1979 to be detained indefinitely 'at the Secretary of State's pleasure'. He was released in 1993 after 14 years. After his release Gorman appealed his conviction and was subsequently acquitted.

## PETER HAMILTON

One of four escapees to be arrested hiding in the River Lagan, about half an hour after the escape, Peter Hamilton was among those most viciously beaten by the RUC and screws. Hamilton, from Ardoyne in North Belfast, was serving a life sentence at the time of the escape following his arrest in 1975. He was finally released in April 1993.



• Tony Kelly (left) and Kieran Fleming (right) pictured a month before Kieran's tragic death in December 1984

## PAUL KANE

Arrested outside Castlewellan along with

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Brendan Mead the day after the escape. Paul Kane from Ardoe was another prisoner convicted solely on the evidence of Christopher Black. In 1986, he got bail on the escape charges after the original charges were quashed on appeal, and went on the run. In November 1987 he was arrested along with Dermot Finucane in a house near Granard, County Longford, during a 26 County search by Gardaí for the INLA kidnappers of John O'Grady.

Although the original British extradition warrants served on Kane in Granard were defective and he had to be released, the Gardaí pursued him under close surveillance throughout the day into County Cavan, rearrested him on a bogus charge and then served new extradition papers on him.

Paul Kane was extradited back to the North in April 1989, after being held in Portlaoise Prison during a lengthy legal battle, and was finally released in October that year after the period spent awaiting extradition was deducted from his escape sentence.

## GERRY KELLY

One of the group who hid under the floorboards, Gerry Kelly from West Belfast was serving a life sentence at the time of the escape following his repatriation from an English jail.

Arrested in 1973 after the Old Bailey and Scotland Yard bombs in London, Kelly went on hunger strike for 205 days in a bid for repatriation. For all but the first 19 of those

days, he was force-fed at the direction of British Home Secretary Roy Jenkins. After his hunger strike ended, he attempted to escape from Wormwood Scrubs prison in London. In April 1975 he was transferred to the Cages of Long Kesh with political status. In 1977, while receiving medical treatment, he attempted to escape from Lagan Valley hospital, and in 1982 he tried to escape from the Cages. For this last attempt, he was stripped of political status and transferred to the H-Blocks. In April 1982 he nearly succeeded in escaping from Musgrave Park military hospital in Belfast, only being spotted at the last fence. But 1983 was a good year for Gerry Kelly.

After the escape, Kelly was actively involved along the border for several months before travelling to Holland. In January 1986 an apartment in an Amsterdam suburb he was staying in with Bik McFarlane and a third republican was raided by Dutch police using stun grenades. A consignment of weapons some distance away could not be linked to the three men.

In subsequent extradition hearings the independence of the Dutch judiciary, which had initially refused to extradite Kelly because it regarded his original London bombing charges as political, was placed under considerable pressure by the British Government and by the Dutch political decision to use the 1875 Anglo-Dutch Treaty rather than the 1967 Extradition Act. Nonetheless, when Kelly was eventually

extradited from Holland in December 1986, it was only on condition that his original sentence be quashed. Kelly was therefore tried solely on the escape charges, though this included the shooting of John Adams, the screw in the control room. In April 1988, Kelly was acquitted of the Adams shooting, and sentenced to five years for the escape. He was released in June 1989, having served 17 months on remand.

Kelly has since been elected to represent North Belfast in the North's Assembly as is at present serving as a Junior Minister in the Executive.

## TONY KELLY

Tony Kelly from Derry, sentenced in 1980 to indefinite detention as an SOSP prisoner, relates his account of the escape and life on the run.

"I was with Jim Smyth. We hijacked a car and got to Castlewellan. We were sitting in a house watching the news on TV, when it came on that Joe Corey and Paddy McIntyre had been captured – in Castlewellan! We decided to move straight away.

"We got to a safe house in Newry, but when we went in I saw all the walls were covered with republican stuff. The woman of the house was great. She welcomed us in but then she said: 'All the escapers come here. The lads who escaped from Newry courthouse came straight here.' Jim and I just looked at each other and thought 'fuck!'. We had to leave next day. The people in the house were great though. They arranged for a car to collect us and we were taken into Crossmaglen. From there we went to a succession of safe houses across the border.

"Months later and I had still not seen my family since the escape. I'd heard that my family's home in Derry was wrecked during a raid at Christmas, and I was anxious about them. So in February, I was told to go to Sligo, where I was taken to a house and met my mother, father, brother and sister at last. My mother said there was bad news. I thought she was talking about the raid, but then she told me that my brother, John, had died the week before. I couldn't take it in. I've never really accepted that he's dead.

"In 1984 Kieran Fleming, Jim Clarke and I were staying in a house in Donegal. There were two beds in our room. Kieran and I shared one of them. I was in Mayo when I heard Jim was captured and Tony Mac Giolla Brighde was dead. I went back to the house in Donegal to wait for Kieran. I waited for 10 days, not knowing that he was dead. His body



• Three of the escapers, Jim Clarke, Tony Kelly and Seamus Clarke, pictured at a concert in Portlaoise for Sandra Boyle who was dying of leukaemia

wasn't found for over two weeks. I couldn't sleep all that time, willing him to walk in the door. I have a photograph of us together with his parents, taken not long before he died. I miss him still.

"I remained on the run in the first half of 1985. On St Patrick's Day I was in a house in Mayo when I saw the Gardai coming up the lane. I ran out the back of the house, half-dressed, and over the fields. The Gardai came after me but I lost them in the fields and hid in a ditch. It started to snow. I could hear the cars and a helicopter, but they didn't find me. I lay until dark and headed off across the fields again. I got to a farmhouse, but the dogs started to bark and I had to get away from there. I fell into water and it was freezing. When it started to get light, I dug into a ditch again. It snowed all day and I could hear the searching going on near me.

"When it got dark again, I got up to go, but although my brain said 'move', my legs wouldn't work. I was literally frozen stiff. I started to think about Kieran Fleming, about him drowning. I thought: 'Am I going to die here?' That got me going. I got to the road, and to a phone box near a shop. It took me an hour to make a call to a friend, my hands were shaking so much with the cold.

"By the time my friend got to me, I was unconscious, lying in the phone box. He took me to a safe house which ironically, and unknown to me, was only 50 yards from the phone box, and the people called a doctor. All I can remember of the next few days is being wrapped in tinfoil. I came round once, and the woman of the house was sprinkling me with holy water! The doctor said that another hour and I'd have died of hypothermia. I had frost bite in my toes. It took me a month to recover. Those people in Mayo saved my life.

"In July 1985, I was staying with Jim Boyle in Killybegs. He gave me a lift to a house one day. I didn't know there was anything in the house but the Gardai were waiting for anyone to go there. Jim and I were arrested and charged with possession of stuff in the house. He was framed. I felt really bad about that. He got four years. His daughter died while he was in Portlaoise, she was a lovely young girl.

"We both got bail before the trial, and I went to Bundoran, and on 5 August at a disco, I met Marie. A friend introduced us. It was love at first sight."

Marie explains, however, that with the noise in the disco she didn't hear the friend's introduction properly, which was: "This is Tony Kelly, who is out on £20,000 bail." "I

thought she said he had £20,000! I thought he was a good catch. Little did I know! I didn't realise who he was, but we saw each other every day that week and although I had to go home I came back down the following weekend. That was it. We got a place to stay in Donegal.

"In October I found I was pregnant. Tony told me everything about himself and what it would mean if I stayed with him. I had no hesitation. It wasn't that I accepted it, just that I knew what he was and I loved him. We got engaged before Tony jumped bail in November. He was back on the run from then."

Tony takes up the story: "I was delighted Marie was pregnant because I loved her, but as well as that, I never thought that I would have the chance to have a family. If I hadn't escaped, I would still be in the blocks. I had no release date. Here was a whole new life opening up.

Marie had to meet Tony secretly. She describes being taken to see him when she was eight months pregnant, having to climb over ditches and hedges in the dark. She went home to have the baby, but Tony was unable to see his daughter until she was a few months old.

Tony recalls: "I was only able to see the baby three times in two years, though I saw Marie more often. Our relationship is very strong, in spite of not having a normal life all those years. When I was arrested in Dublin on 26 November 1987 [with fellow escapee Séamus Clarke] I had just left Marie. In January 1988 I was sentenced to seven years for the Killybegs charge. Marie was in court all through the trial. I got two days' parole to get married in May 1990, and I was released on 1 April this year.

"People don't recognise what women go through. All the time I was in Portlaoise, Marie never missed travelling from the North for a visit. She got up at 4am to get to the jail in time. Once the bus broke down in Dundalk, and she hitched all the way to Portlaoise and back again. And she reared our daughter on her own, with all the pressure and responsibility of that. In our struggle it often seems that it's 'men, men, men'. But it is the women who are the strength and direction." Tony still lives in Donegal.

## RAB KERR

Amid the confusion at the tally lodge, Rab Kerr, as part of the tally lodge rearguard, bought vital time for the other escapees. He was overpowered by screws almost immedi-

ately and savagely beaten. Rab was released on licence in the 1990s, however in November 1996 he was arrested at his Twinbrook home and charged possession of documents. Rab was eventually acquitted on these charges but his licence was revoked and he was returned to prison. In 1997 his case went before the Life Sentence Review board and he was re-released on licence.

## TERRY KIRBY

Serving a life sentence at the time of the escape after his conviction in 1978, Terry Kirby from Belfast was one of the group of escapees who trekked across country. He was arrested in the United States and held with fellow escapees Kevin Barry Art and Pól Brennan until all three were released. Following a fight on his behalf by supporters in the United States, Kirby was allowed to remain in America.

## BRENDAN MEAD

Recaptured with Paul Kane outside Castlewellan, Brendan Mead, from West Belfast, was released on licence in the mid-1990s.

## TONY McALLISTER

One of the escape group that walked to South Armagh, Tony McAllister from Belfast had originally been jailed for life in 1979. He was never recaptured after the escape.

## JIM McCANN

Caught within minutes of the escape, Jim 'Jaz' McCann from Belfast was one of the longest-serving sentenced prisoners following his arrest in June 1976. In 1993, while on pre-release parole, he was awarded an Open University first-class BA (Hons) degree in Humanities, in a ceremony at the University of Ulster. Jaz was finally released in 1994.



## GERRY McDONNELL

'Blute' McDonnell from Belfast, sentenced in

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1978 to 16 years for possession of explosives, had a reputation for having been a particularly uncompromising blanketman, and had ended his no-work protest only shortly prior to the escape.

On 22 June 1985 he was recaptured in Glasgow along with members of an IRA active service unit, and was sentenced to life for conspiracy to cause explosions in Britain. He was returned to Long Kesh in the 1990s and eventually released under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

## SÉAMUS McELWAINE

Séamus McElwaine, who hailed from a strong republican family in Knockatallon, County Monaghan, was killed by undercover British soldiers in the townland of Mullaghglass near Roslea, County Fermanagh, early on Saturday morning, 26 April 1986. He was engaged on active service at the time of his death.

Within days of Séamus McElwaine's death, Seán Lynch, a second man who was injured but survived the British ambush, revealed that the denim-clad undercover British soldiers had captured Séamus after he was injured by an initial burst of gunfire. For up to half an hour they interrogated him before firing another three shots, two of

which struck Séamus in the head, killing him.

Although Séamus McElwaine had just turned 26 three weeks before his summary execution at the hands of the British, he was a veteran member of the Irish Republican Army, having joined its ranks at the age of just 16 years.

A member of Fianna Éireann from the age of 14, he was invited by a relative in the United States to go to university there when he reached 16. He refused the offer saying "No one will ever be able to accuse me of running away".

By the time he was 19, Séamus was Officer Commanding the IRA in County Fermanagh. He possessed many qualities of leadership and yet was unassuming to the point of shyness.

As OC in Fermanagh, Séamus sought the advice of all Volunteers on every aspect of an operation. From an operational standpoint he was absolutely meticulous.

In 1981 Séamus and a group of Volunteers had been captured by British soldiers at Roslea, County Fermanagh. The RUC were called to the scene and one of them remarked that he hoped Séamus would "rot in jail for at least 20 years". At his trial he received a life sentence, with a 30-year recommendation.

While a prisoner in Long Kesh, Séamus

stood as a Sinn Féin candidate in the Cavan-Monaghan constituency in February 1982, securing nearly 4,000 votes.

Séamus McElwaine was a man of exceptional ability and could have been successful in any walk of life, and it was this ability - and his shrewd knowledge of rural Ireland - that was so invaluable in helping to realise the successful escape of himself and seven comrades in September 1983.

## BRENDAN McFARLANE

Arrested in August 1975 and given a life sentence, Brendan 'Bik' McFarlane from Ardoyne in North Belfast was imprisoned in the Cages of Long Kesh, but was stripped of political status following an escape attempt in March 1978 along with Larry Marley and Pat McGeown.

The OC of the H-Blocks during the 1981 hunger strike, McFarlane was appointed adjutant of the escape.

Active on the border for some time after the escape, McFarlane was arrested with Gerry Kelly in Amsterdam in January 1986 and faced a British extradition warrant. Unlike Kelly, the Dutch courts ruled against the political nature of the original charges against him, and he was re-imprisoned in the H-Blocks in December 1986 to complete that



\* The capture of Paddy McIntyre and Joe Corey in Castlewellan, County Down

sentence – along with five years for the escape

On the day Bik was to be released on license he was arrested near Dundalk by the Gardai. Charged in connection with the 1983 abduction of supermarket boss Don Tidey. Following a ten-year-long legal battle, the case against Brendan McFarlane collapsed and in June 2008 he walked free from the Special Court in Dublin

## SEÁN McGLINCHÉY

Caught in the River Lagan shortly after the escape, Seán 'Chunky' McGlinchey from County Derry was finally released in December 1990 after serving 16 years of a life sentence

## PADDY McINTYRE

Recaptured two days after the escape along with Joe Corey near Castlewellan, Paddy McIntyre was released on pre-release home leave at Christmas in 1976. However, charges relating to the escape were still hanging over him, and he did not return to the jail

McIntyre was arrested by Gardai in Killybegs, County Donegal, in January 1987 under the Offences Against the State Act, intended to hold him until extradition warrants arrived from the RUC. When his case was finally heard in the High Court in Dublin on 7 May 1987, Judge Gannon ordered his release because he had been held illegally under an extension of the OASA solely to accommodate the arrival of the extradition warrants

Even after the judge's ruling, Gardai and prison officers refused to release McIntyre. Lawyers for the Dublin Government tried to argue that the ruling did not cover all the extradition warrants and that McIntyre should be returned to Portlaoise. The judge had to repeat that he had ordered his unconditional release. McIntyre left court surrounded by family and friends, and sped away on a motorbike. The charges laid against him in the extradition warrants relating to the escape had already collapsed in a Belfast court

Paddy is now living back home in Donegal

## PÁDRAIG McKEARNEY

First imprisoned at the age of 17, Pádraig McKearney from the Moy in County Tyrone began his third jail term – 14 years for possession – after his arrest in 1980

After the escape, he returned to active service with the IRA, along with fellow escaper Séamus McElwaine and Volunteers

like Jim Lynagh, in a steady stream of attacks in Counties Tyrone and Armagh.

Described by his brother Tommy (himself in H3 at the time of the escape) as extremely intelligent but also very impatient", Pádraig had a reputation for always questioning tactical approaches and searching for new lines of attack

On 8 May 1987, Pádraig was killed along with seven other IRA Volunteers and a civilian passer-by in an SAS ambush at Loughgall as they carried out an attack on the RUC barracks there

It was the biggest single loss of IRA Volunteers since the Tan War

Pádraig's funeral, on 13 May, marked another tragic event – the anniversary of the death on active service in 1974 of Pádraig's brother Seán, along with his comrade, Eugene Martin



## MARTIN McMANUS

Marty McManus from Ballymurphy in Belfast was caught at an RUC checkpoint on the A1 near Dromore, along with Marcus Murray. He was finally released from jail in September 1989 after completing a 15-year sentence for possession following his arrest in February 1978, plus five years for the escape

## DERMOT McNALLY

One of the eight escapers who walked to South Armagh, Dermot McNally from Lurgan, serving a life sentence at the time of the escape, recounted his experiences of the first few weeks after the escape, including a series of moves between safe houses.

"A more permanent house was found for us and eight of us were moved there. A family took eight of us in and we were in that house for six or seven months. They were fantastic. They kept us, fed us, bought us clothes. They were our family. They totally accepted us. It must have been a huge disruption to their lives, but they never alluded to

it. The children, who were young enough, never told a soul that we were there. The family kept up their usual routine. How they did it with eight of us in the house, I'll never know.

"There were a few times I was so nearly caught. One time, I'd just arrived at a house I was staying in. I'd taken off my shoes and coat and sat down to smoke a cigarette. My bag was lying on the floor. There was a big bang on the door. The wee girl was in the house, she was only about 13. She went to the door and opened it. I heard her coming to the door of the room where I was. She shouted in 'Mammy, it's the guards, they want to search the house.' I jumped out the window, no shoes on me, but I got away. That kid was so quick-thinking, she saved me.

"We still did not go out in daylight. We walked in the fields at night. There was a lot of Garda and Branch activity. It was at the time Tidey was kidnapped. We had to be on the alert constantly. Sometimes, we went fishing at night. It was very therapeutic and also got us some fish! But we had to add the bailiffs to those who were looking for us!

"I did not see my own family for nearly nine months. I actually found it difficult to go out. The people of the house drove me to meet my mother and sister in a hotel. The awful thing was, I couldn't wait to get back with the people of the house. I was so nervous and had become so attached to them. We had to leave that house shortly after that. It was very hard to do. We had become so close to them, so emotionally attached to them and I suppose dependent on them. They had looked after us all so well and protected us. We were all crying. I have seen them several times since – the feeling is still there and the welcome. I'll never forget them and what they did.

During his time on the run, Dermot McNally met a local woman where he was staying and had two children.

"The longer you are on the run, the more paranoid you get. You start asking yourself, why am I still alive and free when so many are dead or in jail again. Séamus McElwaine was to be my son's godfather. He was killed the weekend before the christening. I still miss him. My son is called after Séamus, Kieran Fleming and Anthony McBride.

"I was only 18 when I went to jail. I had not developed my politics – I hadn't developed myself. But I thought a lot and learnt a lot during eight years in the blocks. I will never forget the hunger strikers. But for them, I'd still be in jail. What happened to me after



• Dermot McNally and family

I escaped was the best education I could get. It has given me understanding of people, knowledge of life, in fact it has given me a life. It was a hard life a lot of the time but I have realised, through all the people I have met and their commitment and courage and

generosity, that we can't lose. But without my girl, I'd never have survived. She gave me stability, a will to be careful. I had her and the kids to comeback to and to stay free for. It's the same today. Words can't express how I feel for her and what I owe her. I hope she

realises how much she did and how much I care for her

"I would like to thank also all the people who helped me, clothed me, fed me and gave me such support. Some people stand out, of course. They will always be special to me. I can't thank them enough. Nor will I ever forget the men I escaped with. The feeling I have for them is so strong. It is a bond that even death has not broken."

#### HARRY MURRAY

Harry was recaptured after he was shot by a British soldier from a sentry post on the perimeter wall. Harry had shot a screw who had drawn his own weapon and tried to arrest some of the unarmed escapees. Harry Murray from Belfast was serving a life sentence, with a 30-year recommendation, unposed at his trial in December 1979. He was released on licence in the 1990s.

#### MARCUS MURRAY

Recaptured with Marty McManus in a commandeered Mercedes on the A1. Marcus Murray from Fermanagh was released in November 1991 after serving his original ten-year sentence plus a sentence for the escape

#### EDDIE O'CONNOR

Recaptured at the tally lodge with Rab Kerr and Dennis Cummings. Eddie O'Connor from County Armagh was released on licence from his life sentence in the 1990s.

#### GARY ROBERTS

Recaptured on his own, late on Sunday night



• British soldiers of the Royal Highland Fusiliers mount a vehicle checkpoint in Belfast following the 1983 escape



• Robert 'Goose' Russell leaving court during his extradition battle

by British soldiers as he crossed a field in darkness, Gary Roberts from Belfast was released in August 1989 after serving 14 years of an SOSB sentence.

#### ROBERT RUSSELL

Arrested in 1980 and framed for something he had no involvement in, Robert 'Goose' Russell from Ballymurphy in West Belfast was serving a 20-year sentence at the time of the escape.

He had appealed the verdict of his trial and had been given a retrial, but the 20-year sentence was upheld. He lodged a second appeal.

In the H-Blocks, Larry Marley asked him if he was interested in escaping and Russell began to help in gathering intelligence, yet with no idea at that stage of the emerging plan.

Part of the group who hid under the floorboards, 'Goose' enjoyed only eight months of relative freedom before being recaptured

in Dublin on 26 May 1984 and imprisoned in Portlaoise awaiting extradition. Feeling he had little to lose, Russell took part in the 1985 escape bid from Portlaoise: "I was lying in a cell when the boys came in and said there's an escape on. I said 'no problem'."

'Goose' Russell was sentenced to three years for his involvement in that escape before being extradited back to the Six Counties in 1988, following a ruling by the 26 County Supreme Court that his 'offence' did not merit political exemption.

Ironically, his second appeal on the original 1980 charges was still lodged, and this time his original conviction was overturned. He still had a five-year sentence to serve for his part in the 1983 escape, but by the time of his appeal judgement, he had served all but three weeks of this.

Despite the fact that Russell had effectively served more than eleven years in jails as a result of an 'offence' he did not commit, the

British authorities made him serve that time out before his final release in 1992.

#### JOE SIMPSON

Recaptured in the River Lagan a short time after the escape, Joe Simpson from Belfast was released in 1993 after serving 13 years.

#### JIM SMYTH

Having made his escape along with Tony Kelly, Jim Smyth from Belfast eventually made his way to the USA, where he married and settled in the Sunset district of San Francisco, working as a painter and decorator. Smyth had been originally arrested in 1976 and at his trial in 1978 was sentenced to 20 years.

On 3 June 1992, the same day as Barry McCauley's arrest, Jim Smyth was arrested by the FBI and charged with passport violation offences. He was held in the Federal Detention Centre at Pleasanton in California

and the British Government applied for his extradition.

At a court hearing, Smyth admitted applying for a passport using false identification, and argued a defence of necessity in that his life was in danger if returned to the North. In that set of hearings, the judge agreed to a defence request to examine unpublished British Government documents on the Stalker/Sampson inquiry, the Stevens inquiry, and the Kinvara inquiry. When the British Government refused to supply these documents to the court, Judge Barbara Caulfield said she had no option but to find that nationalists in the North were liable to persecution.

Jim Smyth's extradition hearing on 27 September was the first in what became known in California as the H-Block Three defence campaign (a campaign that included Barry Art and Paul Brennan).



• JIM SMYTH

Smyth was subsequently returned to British jurisdiction by US authorities and

brought back to the H-Blocks. He was one of the first POWs to benefit from the Good Friday Agreement and was released at the end of the 1990s.

## BOBBY STOREY

The OC of the H7 escape, Storey was recaptured in the River Lagan. The West Belfast man was arrested on 20 August 1981 - the day of hunger striker Mickey Devine's death - and sentenced to 18 years plus a subsequent seven years for his role in the escape. He was arrested on the same IRA operation as fellow escaper Dermot Finucane. No stranger to British prisons Storey has seen the inside of jails in England as well as Long Kesh. He was interned in the early 1970s and also found himself interned by remand in Crumlin Road jail from 1976 to 1977. Storey is now the chair of Belfast Sinn Féin.

# Sentences and compensation

**I**N April 1988, 18 of the POWs were sentenced for their part in the escape.

The highest sentence, eight years, was given to Harry Murray after he was convicted of shooting and wounding a screw during the escape. He himself had been shot by a Brit staffing a sentry post at the jail as he made a dash for freedom.

Bobby Storey received seven years for false imprisonment of screws, hijacking and firearms offences.

Gerry Kelly and Bik McFarlane received five-year sentences for false imprisonment after Kelly was acquitted of a second charge of shooting the screw John Adams in the H7 control room. Although Bik had also to serve out the remainder of his existing life sentence, Kelly's pre-escape sentence had been quashed under the terms of his extradition from Holland along with Bik in 1986.

The 14 other escapers on trial also received sentences ranging from three to seven years for false imprisonment or for false imprisonment and possession of weapons. They were Jimmy Burns, Joe Corey, Dennis Cummings, Billy Gorman, Peter Hamilton, Rab Kerr, Brendan Mead, Jim McCann, Séan McGlinchey, Martin McManus, Marcus Murray, Eddie O'Connor, Gary Roberts and Joe Simpson.

All except Bik McFarlane and Gerry Kelly were charged with the killing of the screw James Ferris, who died in the fracas at the tally lodge, but all were acquitted when the medical evidence showed that Ferris had died of a heart attack which could not be proven to be linked to his having been stabbed. Bik and Gerry Kelly were not charged with this, under the terms of their extradition from Holland.

In his judgement, Lord Lowry described the escape as "ingeniously planned - cleverly executed", and as being not a "clandestine flight, but a walkout, or more accurately, a drive-out in broad daylight." He slammed the evidence given by the screws as contradictory, inaccurate and as being motivated in many cases by a wish to conceal failures on the part of individual screws. He described the screws' perception of what had happened on the day of the escape as a "humiliating experience they would prefer to forget".

Two more escapers, Jimmy Donnelly and Paul Kane, were subsequently sentenced also for their part in the escape. Paul had been awaiting extradition from the 26 Counties at the time of the original trial, and Jimmy - whose original sentence on the evidence of the informer Chris Black had been quashed on appeal - had gone on the run after getting bail.

and was recaptured in March 1989.

None of the H7 rearguard were ever identified or charged.

In later court actions taken by the escapers for compensation for injuries inflicted on them by screws after their recapture, many received awards.

£7,500 was awarded to Joe Simpson, Dennis Cummings, Peter Hamilton, Rab Kerr, Séan McGlinchey, Bobby Storey and Eddie O'Connor.

£5,000 was awarded to Billy Gorman and Gary Roberts.

£1,500 was awarded to Brendy Mead, Marcus Murray, Jimmy Burns, Joe Corey and Martin McManus.

£1,000 was awarded to Jim McCann.

The NIO subsequently took a successful court case to recover the £7,500 and £5,000 awards, either as part payment for compensation paid by the NIO to relatives of British soldiers/RUC killed or injured by the POWs, or for compensation paid to screws injured in the escape. The POWs successfully appealed this decision forcing the NIO to honour the full compensation awards made to those men, recaptured in the immediate aftermath of the escape, and who had been brutalised by the screws.

Many of the non-escapers left in H7, who were viciously assaulted by screws in the aftermath of the escape, also received compensation payments.

# They played a crucial role...

**T**WO of the IRA Volunteers who played a crucial role in the escape, but were not among the 38 escapees, were Larry Marley and Kevin McCracken.

LARRY MARLEY from Ardoyne in North Belfast had a formidable reputation for planning and executing escapes. First imprisoned in 1972, he twice tried to escape while on remand. Sentenced to 7 years, he made a series of escape plans and attempts from the Cages of Long Kesh, culminating in a 1975 bid when he and other POWs dressed up as British soldiers

Brought with nine others to Newry courthouse to face trial for this attempt, the ten republicans promptly escaped through a window! Larry returned to active service and was not caught again until 1976. This time he was sentenced to ten years for possession of weapons and explosives while on the run, and was sent back to the Cages. After a further escape attempt on 31 March

1978 he was transferred to the H-Blocks.

After the hunger strikes and the strategic ending of the 'no wash' protest by republicans, Larry once again turned his attention to escapes, as head of the H-Block escape committee. Ironically, the closeness of his release date meant that he did not take part in the operation he had helped to plan – the most spectacular escape of his career.

Released in November 1985 and hoping to spend time with the family he had only seen in jail and while on the run during the previous 13 years, Larry was shot dead by loyalists at his Ardoyne home on 2 April 1987.

His funeral saw what the British media described as "the biggest display of republican support since the hunger strikes", as savage baton charges by the RUC on mourners and their attempts to surround the coffin led to the family calling it off on two successive days. Finally, on the third day, the thousands of people across Belfast and beyond who thronged the streets of



• The funeral of Laurence Marley, shot dead by the UVF. The funeral had twice been cancelled because the RUC had prevented the coffin leaving the family home



• LARRY MARLEY



• KEVIN McCRAKEN

Ardoyne, and the determination of the Marley family, ensured that Larry was buried with dignity.

KEVIN McCRAKEN from Turf Lodge in West Belfast was one of those who, with their own release dates approaching, undertook enormous personal risks as part of the H7 rearguard.

Joining the Fianna in 1972 and the IRA three years later, Kevin was active until his arrest in 1977. Sentenced to 13 years, he played an uncompromising part in the blanket and 'no wash' protests.

Kevin resumed active service on his release in November 1985. On the evening of 14 March 1988, as hundreds of people gathered in West Belfast to wait on the returning bodies of Mairéad Farrell, Dan McCann and Séan Savage from Gibraltar, Kevin McCracken was shot dead less than half a mile away as he prepared to engage British soldiers who had swamped the Turf Lodge district around the Savage family home.



• Jim Clarke and Dermot Finucane

# Clarke/Finucane judgement

THE 26 COUNTY Supreme Court's ruling on 13 March 1990 in the extradition case against Dermot Finucane was a landmark decision which went some way to reversing the erosion of the "political exemption" clause in the 1965 Extradition Act that had taken place throughout the 1980s.

Taken in conjunction with a further ruling on submissions by Finucane and Jim Clarke

that they would be ill-treated if returned to jail in the Six Counties, the Supreme Court decision considerably reduced the likelihood of further attempts to extradite any of the other 1983 escapers.

The decision to free both men rocked the British political establishment. Thatcher described it as "grossly offensive and an encouragement to terrorists", while the NIO security minister, John Cope, said it was a "very mistaken and misleading judgement" and "a deep insult to the prison regime in

Northern Ireland".

The core of the judgement in Dermot Finucane's case involved the repudiation of an earlier High Court ruling upholding his extradition. The lower court had held that Finucane, as a member of the IRA, could not qualify for political exemption under the 1965 Act because the IRA's aim was to overthrow the organs of the state. This ruling, in turn, was based on an earlier Supreme Court ruling in 1985, the case of John Quinn, where the INLA's objectives were described

as the "establishment of a 32 County republic by force of arms". That ruling had been used by the Supreme Court against Robert Russell in 1988 when it held that Russell's activities amounted to subversion of the Constitution.

In Dermot Finucane's case, the Supreme Court held that the Russell judgement should not be followed and, in a significant departure, it stated that it could not draw the inference (as the High Court had done) that the 1965 Act should not apply to those charged with politically-motivated offences, when the objective of those offences was to secure Irish unity.

One of the Supreme Court judges, Mr Justice Walsh, further said that it would be "quite unrealistic to regard the situation" that of the conflict in the Six Counties - "as other than a war or quasi-war".

In defining the entitlement to the political exemption clause of the 1965 Extradition Act in the Finucane judgement, the Supreme Court went onto say that this judgement should be regarded as the precedent for future

cases relating to political exemption under the act. The successful appeal against extradition by Owen Carron a month later, on the same grounds as Finucane, that his offence was "a political offence or connected with a political offence", further enforced this precedent.

The Supreme Court judgement also dealt with claims by Dermot Finucane and Jim Clarke that they would become targets for mistreatment by H-Block screws out for revenge if returned to the Six Counties.

The key submission referred to the 1988 action taken in the High Court in Belfast by a non-escaper H7 prisoner, Brian Pettigrew, who successfully claimed compensation for injuries inflicted on him by screws after the escape. This action had unfortunately not been before the High Court at the time of Robert Russell's extradition proceedings.

The 26 County Supreme Court's ruling said that the Pettigrew case proved that H-Block screws had, after the escape, "clearly at an early stage entered into a widespread conspiracy to deny absolutely all accusations of

assault or ill-treatment and also to deny the refusal of requests for medical assistance".

Those denials had been held by Judge Hutton in the High Court in Belfast during the Pettigrew case to be absolutely false.

The Supreme Court went on: "It would appear that no disciplinary action of any description has been initiated against any of the prison officers in relation either to misconduct by way of assaulting prisoners or to their misconduct in attempting to pervert the course of justice. There does not appear to have been any criminal charge against any of the prison officers and, on the evidence, no disciplinary or criminal charge is likely in the future".

In view of the facts, the Supreme Court held that there was "a probable risk" that Dermot Finucane and Jim Clarke would be "assaulted or injured by the illegal actions of the prison staff" if returned to the H-Blocks. It therefore refused to uphold their extradition on that ground.

The Clarke and Finucane cases thwarted British Government attempts to extradite



\* Jim Clarke after beating extradition proceedings in the Supreme Court, Dublin

# THE GREATEST ESCAPE

IRIS

republican activists from the the 26 Counties

The political exemption clause, at the core of the 1965 Extradition Legislation, was effectively re-established. However, by acknowledging the, "probable risk", to their safety that Clarke and Finucane would face if returned to the custody of the North's Prison service the Supreme Court made it more difficult for the British to extradite republicans

The brutality meted out to republican POWs in the H Blocks in the aftermath of the escape became a legal issue and the Supreme Court noted that the British had refused to prosecute or discipline those in the Prison Service responsible for the violence thus accepting that it would not be safe to send republicans back to the North's Prisons

The terms of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 committed the British Government to releasing the North's political prisoners and opened the way to resolving the issue of those republicans 'on the run' on a case-by-case basis. Some of the escapees returned to the North. Both Finucane and Clarke, however have remained living in the 26 Counties



• Dermot Finucane is whisked away after his Supreme Court appearance



• British soldiers at Long Kesh immediately after the breakout by 38 republican prisoners

# The safe house

THE ESCAPE from the H-Blocks made headlines the world over. The stories of those who got away and what happened to them often made dramatic reading. There was acknowledgement also of those who had assisted in the planning outside. But vital to the escape were other people, totally unknown.

The unsung heroes and heroines of the escape - and of this struggle - are the people who take men and women on the run into their homes, look after them and give them respite, comfort and care. The disruption to the lives and families of such people is immeasurable and carries with it the stress of ensuring absolute secrecy about who is staying in the house. This is the story of one of those heroes, who would laugh to hear herself so described. I'll call her Mary.

"People around here wouldn't dream that I have people in the house. Sometimes it's hard when I hear people talking about trivial things. I feel like saying something but I don't. My family weren't republican but it was a political household. My father was a labour man. I remember him going everywhere on his bicycle, to meetings, fighting for basic rights for working people. And what did it come to? They are as badly off as ever. A long time ago, a relative of mine asked me would I keep people occasionally. Just after the escape, he came with four men, well, boys some of them were really. I didn't know who they were and never asked. I didn't connect them to the escape. Those photographs in the papers, police photographs, never look like the people anyway. But I knew that they'd been through the mill. They were nervous and a bit ill at ease for a while, not sure they were safe I suppose. Once though, I recognised two. They had been staying with me and only a few days later I saw them on TV. They had been captured. I felt sick about it. They were so young. And then to see this lot willing to hand them over. What did they escape from only injustice?"

"One man has stayed here regularly all these years. He likes to sleep at the front of the house. He's always on the alert for peo-

Published as a tribute to the hundreds of families who opened their doors to the H7 escapers in 1983/84 and to those who continue to do so.



• The unsung heroes and heroines of this struggle are the people who take men and women on the run into their homes

ple coming. He has his own key, his own room. I gave him a cupboard and a key for it, so he'd have somewhere to keep his personal things. On the run, they have nowhere to keep stuff like that. I have no washing machine and he insists on doing his own washing - well, there's water from one end of the house to the other! But he wouldn't let me do it for him. I love him like my own. One night he came here, I was feeling a bit down and was complaining that nobody had called to see me all week. 'I'm lonely,' I said. 'Sure haven't you got me?' he said. He cheers me up. If I don't see him for a while I worry about what might have happened to him. I worry about all of them. One lad was here, he was sick, not well at all. It was a January night, really wet and stormy. He said he had to leave to catch a bus. I wouldn't let him go. I made him stay till the next day. At least he had a warm bed for that night. But he was so sick, he shouldn't have been out at all.

"Sometimes things happen and you don't see the funny side till afterwards. One day, I had six of them here. I got a phone call from a relative - another relative was about to set out to visit me. I panicked. I told her the house was upside down and to stall him for a while till I got it tidied up. Then I told the boys to move themselves fast! Then of course, I had to tidy the house up to fit my story. I've got used to dealing with situations like that now. My immediate family know now. At

first they were worried about it but I said all my life I've done what other people expected of me, I did what I was supposed to do. But I do this because I want to. It's my decision. I don't think I'm 'good' or 'brave' though I do know the dangers. 'Gerry' is one of the family now. He gets hugged and kissed by all of us. We are a very affectionate family so he gets all that as well as his bed and his food! He is very careful. He has never been caught and he is very cautious. No one else knows he stays here but us.

"Why do I do it? It seems right and natural. It's the way I can help. They have suffered so much. If I can make it a bit easier for them I will. Living on the run, living out of a bag, having no base, it's so hard for them and they are so young. They have given up their whole lives.

"People nowadays, they seem to be so afraid to think for themselves. They are ashamed, ashamed of being Irish. My father fought all his life for workers' rights. The hardship that people suffered in those days and what difference has it made? They were sold out.

"The cost to me? I don't think of it like that, though there were times I gave them the last bite in the house! They didn't know that of course! At least when they are here they have a good bed and decent food and I know they are going away the better for it. I'd give them anything I could. Aren't I helping my own?"

# 25th ANNIVERSARY OF THE LONG KESH ESCAPE T-SHIRT

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Long Kesh prison, outside Belfast, was regarded as one of the most escape-proof prisons in Europe, yet on 25 September 1983 the biggest prison escape in British history saw 38 republican POWS escape from H-Block 7 of the maximum security jail.

The escape was a major morale boost for the republican struggle and, two weeks later, with 19 former prisoners still free, *An Phoblacht* interviewed the key IRA Active Service personnel involved in the planning and execution of the escape and exclusively revealed the story behind the greatest republican escape ever.

The print on the t-shirt is a copy of the *An Phoblacht* front page covering this story.

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